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THE MATING OF THE BLADES

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By

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TO MY FRIEND
JAMES A. McCANN
WHO ALSO PUBLISHES MY BOOKS

THE MATING OF THE BLADES

CHAPTER I

A prologue—yet quite necessary to the tale—switching incongruously and illogically from the heart of Asia to the gray heart of London Town. Also introducing a dead Ameer, two oily, shuffling Babus out of Bengal, and a sandy-haired gentleman who likes the view of Poultney's Inn.

THUS, on an auspicious day in the dark half of the sacred month of Dhu'l-Hijja, did they bear to his last resting-place Syyed Mazud Mirza Ahmet Nazredeen el-Arabi el-Husseinyieh Kajar Gengizkhani, Ameer of Tamerlanistan and thirty-ninth of his dynasty, while the women wailed and beat their breasts, while the conches brayed and the tomtoms sobbed and reed pipes shrieked, while white robed, green turbaned Moslem priests chanted the liturgy, and while the smoke from many ceremonial fires ascended to the lapis blue sky in thick, wispy streamers and hung in a ruddy, bloodshot cloud that lit up the palace and told to all Central Asia that the last male member of the Gengizkhani family —*Zi'l-Ullah,* "Shadow of Allah," was their arrogant, hereditary title—had gone to join the spirits of his kinsmen in the seventh hall of Mohammed's paradise.

Out of the palace, that crowned the basalt hillside with turrets and bartizans and bell-shaped domes and

swung down into the dip of the valley with an avalanche of bold masonry, they carried the dead Ameer; through the western gate, a crumbling marble structure, incrusted with symbolistic figures and archaic terra-cotta medallions, and topped by a lacy, fretted lotus-bud molding; through the maze of the town, with its crooked streets, its low, white houses, its cool gardens ablaze with peach and almond and scarlet flowering peepul trees; through the main bazaar that stretched like a Suruk rug dimmed by the Hand of Time into smoky purple and dull orange; on toward the river where the young sun had crumpled the morning mists into torn gauze veils.

Bolt upright, as during life, the corpse sat on a chair of state that spread up and out like the tail of a peacock. He was attired in his most splendid costume: the arms encircled by jeweled bracelets, shimmering necklaces of pearls and garnets and moonstones and yellow Poonah diamonds hanging to the waist shawl, a huge, carved emerald falling like a drop of green fire from the small, twisted turban, the face painted and powdered, the pointed beard carefully curled and dyed a vivid blue with indigo, between his feet his favorite *kalian* waterpipe, an immense affair of iron, inlaid with gold arabesques and studded with uncut rubies.

Almost grim, by contrast, was the naked, straight, six-foot blade which lay across his knees. Simple, it was, blue-gray, without engravings or ornaments of any sort.

All the dignitaries of the land were there to speed his soul.

There was Tagi Khan, Master of Horse, in purple silk, his wicked, shriveled old face topped ludicrously by a coquettish turban in pale cerise, beard and finger-nails dyed a bright crimson with henna; Koom Khan, the *sipar salar*—the commander-in-chief, who had left behind his silver-tipped staff of office and was holding in his bony, brown right hand a large cluster of those dark violet lilies which the Persians call First Born Buds, to put upon the grave; the Sheik-ul-Islam, in green silk from head to foot, a miniature Koran bound in red and silver Bokharan leather stuck in his waist shawl; Gulabian, the Armenian treasurer, in sober black, fur capped; Tugluk Khan, the court architect, thinking morosely that his last work—the mausoleum of olive-veined Yezd marble which would house the Ameer by the side of his ancestors—was done.

Came Nedjif Hassan Khan, governor of the eastern marches, whispering to his twin brother and worst enemy, the sheik Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, governor of the western marches; came pipe bearer and slipper bearer and fan bearer; the palace eunuchs, huge, paunchy, plum-colored Nubians, arrogant, sneering; the chief executioner in motley red and black; and many, many others, with bowed head and dragging feet, in token of mourning.

Too, envoys from the neighboring lands; from the East, the Ameer of the Afghans, until thirty years earlier the hereditary foes of the Tamerlanis, had sent his youngest brother, Nasrullah Nadir Khan el-Durani; Persia was fittingly represented by lisping, mincing Mirza Markar Khan, who ogled the women, old and young, veiled and unveiled, as the cortège

passed through the bazaar; the stony, cruel North had sent Bokharan chief, Khivan noble, and Turkoman grandee; while, from the South, Sir Craven Elphinstone, C.B., G.C.S.I., deputy resident at the court of Kashmere, slightly self-conscious, slightly nostalgic amidst the thousands of Asiatics, had crossed the Himalayas to tender the condolences of the Raj, the British-Indian government.

Everybody was there, except the late king's only child, the Princess Aziza Nurmahal who, according to the ancient custom, was sitting alone in the tower room of the palace harem, mumbling endless prayers and clicking off the ninety-nine holy names of Allah on her amber rosary; and the Ameer's best, oldest friend and prime minister, Hajji Akhbar Khan, on whom, a year before his death, he had conferred the honorable title of *Itizad el-Dowleh*—"Grandeur of the State."

The cortège passed on, out to the willow fringed banks of the Ghulan River that lay across the mauve and rose mosaic of the town like a ribbon of watered silk.

River of grim tragedies!

River of sinister reputations; so sinister that there was not a Tamerlani who ever, knowingly, allowed a drop of it to pass his lips!

River which, for centuries, had been the grave of the thousands of Tamerlanis and raiding Afghans massacred in the narrow streets of the city or slain in fierce combats outside its brown, bastioned walls. Sorrowing widows, disgraced courtiers, vanquished

pretenders, and fanatical dervishes had sought the solace of oblivion beneath its placid surface. Faithless wives and dancing girls had been hurled into its depths from a nearby tower that had been erected centuries before and for a reason known to but few had always been called "The Englishman's Boast."

On the river's farther bank stood the mausoleum.

And there they buried the last male member of the Gengizkhani family, while the women wailed and beat their breasts, while the conches brayed and the tomtoms sobbed, while the Princess Aziza Nurmahal cried her heart out, and while, in an opium shop near the bazaar of the mutton butchers on the northern outskirts of the town, the Babu Bansi, a typical Bengali from his round, greasy, chocolate-brown face to his openwork white socks, patent leather pumps, and striped cotton umbrella, bent over the prone form of his countryman, the Babu Chandra.

He made sure that the latter had succumbed completely to the bland, philosophic poppy drug, pressed half a golden toman into the grimy, much beringed fingers of the dancing girl who had filled and refilled the other's opium pipe and, if the truth be told, had made assurance doubly sure by doctoring the sizzling, acrid cubes with asclepias juice and dawamesk-hashish, slipped his hand into the unconscious man's waist shawl, brought out a key, and flitted into the street like an obese and nervous shadow.

As fast as his wobbly calves would let him, he ran to the office of the Anglo-Asian Cable Company of which his countryman was manager, clerk, despatcher, messenger, and factotum in general, opened the door

with the stolen key, and busied himself with the telegraph board for half an hour.

Click-clack-clicketty-clack went his nimble fingers, sending a triumphant message across land and sea and land again.

After which, from a mysterious hiding-place about his stout person, he drew a sharp-edged hatchet and smashed the delicate telegraph instruments into a chaotic mass of wooden splinters and twisted copper wires.

Six hours and twenty minutes later, in a dingy, cobwebby office on the top floor of an architectural infamy on Upper Thames Street, just beyond the Fishmongers' Hall, in the reeking heart of the City of London, a short, stocky, blue-eyed, sandy-haired man stepped away from the fly-specked window where he had been admiring the deceptively romantic outlines of Poultney's Inn.

"Half a jiff, old cockywax!" he called in answer to the insistent knocking at the door, opened it, and admitted a red-faced, red-capped, impudent messenger boy.

"Cyble, sir," said the latter, "for—right-oh!—party by name of Gloops!"

"Right you are, young fellow-my-lad. That's our cable address. Hand it over. What you waitin' for? Eh? Tip? Chase yourself!"

"Aw—chyse yer own ruddy self!"

"Out you go!"

And the messenger boy made a hurried and undignified exit propelled by a square-toed, number nine and

a quarter blucher whose owner the next second opened the cablegram.

"*Gloops, London, England,*" he read; and the message continued, in a typical Babu jumble of mixed metaphors and martyrized slang:

"Regret to report old Ameer jolly well popped underground. But ripping old silver lining to proverbial thunderstorm. Have discovered bloody cinch of pinching whole bally swag if Gloops uses gray matter. Do not cable here as have smashed expensive instruments into smithereens and cocked hat to annoy and harass the competition. Cable instead to Teheran using code. Am hot-legging it there like a sizzling whirlwind. Beg to repeat that collaring of swag is no end of ripping old cinch. Am writing particulars. Tell Gloops meanwhile should look up Burke's Peerage find bally old nobility family whose escutcheon is double headed lion and establish with them jolly old social relations.

"(Signed) BANSI."

"My sainted grandaunt Priscilla Mary Jane!" murmured the sandy-haired man. "The whole swag! My word! Won't the guv'nor be pleased though! But what in the name of the three-cornered dooce does that Bansi lad mean by his allusion to Burke's Peerage? Well—I fancy the guv'nor will know."

And he lit a rank woodbine cigarette and resumed the inspiring study of Poultney's Inn, drumming loudly, at rhythmic intervals, on the window pane.

CHAPTER II

Giving an intimate but not indelicate "close-up" of an Oriental princess with eyes as black as grief and lips crimson as a fresh sword wound. There is furthermore mysterious talk of the Mating of Blades.

"HEAVENBORN!" wheezed the Babu Chandra, squinting through opium-reddened eyes. "Seventy-seven times seventy-seven bundles of indignity, injustice, and evil abuse have been heaped upon my head! A scoundrel of unmentionable ancestry, limited understanding, degenerate soul, and most ungainly body has robbed me of my substance! I appeal to the Heavenborn, the Protector of the Weak and the Pitiful!"—and he bowed before the Princess Aziza Nurmahal, clasping his pudgy hands across his pudgy stomach.

She looked at him, undecided what to say. Then her eyes swept about the audience hall where the dignitaries of the palace, from the commander-in-chief to the executioner, were squatting on mats, attended by servants who fanned them with silver-handled yak tails. Directly at her feet crouched her old nurse, Ayesha Zemzem, a Bakhtiari hill woman from the western wilds; lean she was and angular and brown as a berry, with an uptilted chin that rose defiantly to meet the sardonic lower lip, an immense beak of a nose, and eyes sharp as needle points.

The princess sighed.

Seated in the glittering, chilly depth of the great peacock throne that spread above her tiny, oval face with a barbaric blaze of emeralds and pearls and rubies and star sapphires, with her narrow, diminutive hand nervously clutching a scepter topped by an immense blue diamond known as the "Sea of Light," with that little soft vagueness about her cherry lips and her eyes like black wells beneath the hooded lids, she looked childish, appealing, rather pathetic. There is something sinister in the relentlessness in which inheritance may force people into a position they are not framed to fill, thrusting power into their hands and judgments into their mouths, whether they desire it or not.

Thus with Aziza Nurmahal.

The peacock throne and the autocratic power which it embodied were meant for men of crunching, clouting, merciless strength of mind and body; men like her father, who had ruled his turbulent subjects with an iron, rather saturnine hand and with the loyal help of his old prime minister, Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh.*

But the former was dead while the latter had left the country on a mysterious mission a day after Hakem Ali, the court physician, had decided that there was no hope for his master's life. And already intrigue was raising its flat head, was whispering, craftily, crookedly, in palace and bazaar and behind the curtains of the harems.

It had begun with the Master of Horse, Tagi Khan, openly accusing Gulabian, the Armenian treasurer, of

having embezzled twenty thousand gold coins, which he had spent upon a *nautch* girl from the south. The Armenian had given the reply discourteous by producing three witnesses who swore upon the Koran that the shoe pressed on the other foot, that it was Tagi Khan who had stolen the money and imported the *nautch* from Kashmere, and that the latter had merely asked the Armenian for protection because the other, in a drunken fit, had threatened to split her pretty little nose with a dagger. At once the palace had divided into camps. Lies and calumnies had run like powder under spark. The outer courtyard had witnessed a murderous encounter with bucklers and naked blades between the twin brothers, who were respectively governors of the eastern and the western marches. The princess, not knowing if she should believe the party of Tagi Khan or that of Gelaldin, was being caught between the upper and nether millstone, and, finally, a few days earlier, Koom Khan, the commander-in-chief, had approached her with the arrogant suggestion that, since she seemed not strong enough to rule, she should appoint him *Firman Firma*—Decreer of Decrees—regent, in other words.

But her pride had rebelled. The ancient Gengiz-khani blood had screamed in her veins. Cutting insults ringing in his ears, she had sent Koom Khan from her presence—and to-day, in all that motley assembly of courtiers, there was not one whom she dared trust.

"Heavenborn!" the Babu commenced again.

She bit her lip. She blushed.

"I—I . . ."

She stammered, slurred, stopped; and a faint, withering snicker ran from sneering lip to sneering lip. Beards dyed blue with indigo and red with henna wagged and mocked. Fingers ablaze with precious stones opened and shut like the sticks of a fan to show the futility of all created things, but chiefly of woman. The Sheik-ul-Islam chanted a sonorous *"Alhamdulillah!"* and lifted his hands to heaven in a Pharisee gesture, as if to ask Allah to grant him patience: all signs which encouraged the Babu Chandra who ordinarily, being a Babu, would have walked softly and talked yet more softly in a gathering of Moslems.

He unclasped his pudgy hands from across his stomach, and stood up straight. There was now neither whine nor whimper in his voice as, very much after the manner of a latter-day, berry brown Robespierre, he addressed the princess:

"I demand justice! Here, in thy town, O Aziza Nurmahal, was I drugged, by a shameless dancing girl and by one Bansi; may this and that and especially this happen to him! For a week every day they drugged my little pipe of opium which I am forced to smoke because my spleen is yellow with a very much devouring sickness. When finally I was myself again, I discovered that Bansi had stolen the key to my office"—which was the truth—"and also one hundred and seventy rupees, five annas in Indian money and sixteen golden Persian tomans" — which was a lie. "Furthermore, he has smashed all the so expensive instruments of the Anglo-Indian Cable Company of which I am the deservedly trusted servant. I demand justice, Heavenborn!"

Aziza Nurmahal knew exactly what her father would have done under the same circumstances: just a gesture and a word to the executioner to give "one hundred and fifteen sticks to this pig of an infidel Babu who dares raise his voice in the presence of his betters." For he had been a rough man whose entire philosophy of government had been a rough fact reduced to yet rougher order and who had always surrendered completely to the gods of his enormous, pagan resolution. She, on the other hand, had been taken direct from the zenana to the throne room. She had not yet learned how to bury the poetry and the enthusiasms of her soft youth beneath the stony drag and smother of life.

She felt the contemptuous enmity of the crowd.

Again she stammered. Again there was a ripple of laughter and whispered, malign words; the Sheik-ul-Islam quoting with pontifical unction that power without wisdom was like a cloud without rain, Gulabian advancing artlessly that it is impossible to clap with one hand alone, and the governor of the eastern marches pleasantly completing the circle of Oriental metaphors by mentioning that some people were on horseback—while their brains walked on foot.

And then, suddenly, while the little princess' eyes dimmed with welling tears, the old nurse rose and pointed a crooked, withered thumb at Chandra.

"Thou *art* a Babu," she said in an even, passionless voice, "and tell me: who would believe a Babu—who would keep meat on trust with a jackal?"

The next moment, while the Babu collapsed into an obese heap, she faced the commander-in-chief,

causing the laughter that had bubbled to his lips to choke out in a surprised, ludicrous ululation.

"And, as to thee, remember that the mule's friendship is a kick—and that thou *art* a mule, while thou"—her inexorable thumb stabbing toward the governor of the eastern marches who was trying to hide behind his twin brother—"shouldst consider that, the dinner over, an ungrateful dog values not the spoon, that, with the Ameer dead, thou hast forgotten how he picked thee, a leprous and most disgusting child, from the fetid slime of the bazaar gutter and raised thee to a high seat of dignity!

"As to thee," confronting the Armenian, "O thou cursed borrower of half-rupees, observe that a benefit conferred on an ingrate is a line written in water, while thou"—indicating the Sheik-ul-Islam—"wouldst do well to ponder over the Afghan saying that it is as impossible to make a priest speak the truth as to cover a kettledrum with the skin of a mouse!

"Away, all of ye! Out of the presence of the Heavenborn, O ye great cockroaches! Ye fathers of bad smells! Ye sons of noseless mothers! Out—spawn of much filth! Out—before I, a meek and defenseless woman . . ."

They did not wait to hear the rest of her threat. The Babu leading, the Sheik-ul-Islam bringing up the rear in undignified hurry, his sacerdotal robe standing out like a flag, they ran from the room, stumbling over each other, while Ayesha Zemzem, turning to console her mistress, found that the latter had burst into peals of laughter, rocking to and fro in an abandon of mirth.

"Ahee! Ahoo!" she laughed. "Did not the commander-in-chief tell me that Tamerlanistan needed a strong hand and a strong mind to rule my turbulent subjects? He was right—by Allah and by Allah! And it is thou who shalt be *Firman Firma*—Decreer of Decrees! It is thou who shalt be prime minister while Hajji Akhbar is away!"

And thus it happened that, a day or two later, in full durbar, the princess announced that a rough woman from the hills would hereafter be regent and that she should be addressed by the honorable title of *Zil-i-Sultana,* "Shadow of the Queen." Nor, which is interesting to consider, was there very much surprise in the bazaars. For, since time immemorial, have the autocrats of Asia maintained the democratic principle that ability is the only qualification for the highest services; have they stooped among the crowd, clutched a common soldier, a slipper bearer, a tobacconist, a renegade, even a slave, and given him limitless power, absolutely disregarding all the barriers of birth and cultivation and asking of him nothing but success.

Thus it was Ayesha Zemzem who shared the princess' peacock throne when, shortly afterwards, Babu Chandra had been granted another audience.

This time he spoke softly. He did not mention the indignities which his fellow countryman had heaped upon him nor did he mention justice.

"Heavenborn," he began; then, addressing the nurse who was looking upon him with a chilly, unpropitious eye, "and thou, O Shadow of the Heaven-

born! I have the welfare of Tamerlanistan at heart. . . ."

"*Aughrr!*" grunted Ayesha Zemzem, after the manner of an indignant camel. "I know, O baseborn! At seventeen per cent compound interest a minute, and a mortgage on the cow and the unborn calf!"

"No—no—by the Holy Trimurti!" stammered Babu Chandra. "I am a friend of this land—a friend of the Gengizkhani!"

"Right!" came the cutting rejoinder, "and it has indeed been said that he who has a Babu for a friend needs no enemy. Leave this room. We like not thy fat and indecent face."

"But—" said the Babu.

"But—what, fat toad?"

"I came here on business!"

"Business? Dost thou want to buy or to sell?"

"Neither the one nor the other. I want to—give!"

For the first time, the princess opened her mouth.

"Give?" she asked, with a flash of even white teeth and a glint of merriment in her black eyes. "Who ever heard of a Bengali giving aught except false measure?"

"Rightly spoken!" chimed in the nurse. "Can a Babu be generous? Can a frog catch cold?"

But, nowise daunted by the avalanche of contumacious metaphors, Chandra continued that he had friends, rich and generous sahebs, who were anxious to pour gold into the land as one pours melted butter on rice.

"Millions and millions of golden tomans will they give to thee, O Aziza Nurmahal. They will irrigate

the dry lands. They will bore for oil. They will develop coal and copper and ruby mines. They will cause the fruit orchards to yield ten times what they are yielding now. They will make all thy subjects rich and prosperous. All they want in return for such incredible generosity is"—he used the one English word known throughout Asia—"a concession!"

"Perhaps—" began the old nurse, an eager, greedy light in her eyes.

But the princess silenced her with a gesture and turned to Chandra.

"It is useless, O Babu-jee," she said. "Often, during my father's life-time, didst thou approach him with the same words. I know. I was behind the zenana curtains, and listened. Thy countryman, the Babu Bansi, came to him with the same message . . ."

"Bansi is a liar! He is a . . ."

"Thou shouldst hear what *he* says about *thee!*" chuckled the nurse.

"Never mind," the princess went on. "My father was always opposed to the sahebs and"—she, too, used the English word—"the concessions which they demand in payment of their shining generosity. He used to say that a concession means money—but that, never, never, does it mean happiness—to us, the people of Asia. For—and these, too, are my father's words—with every pound of gold do the sahebs bring three pounds of whiskey and strife and disease and unhappiness. I shall do as my father has done—until Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh,* returns from the far places. Then he, being wise and old and loyal, shall decide. The audience is ended, O Babu-jee!"

"If only the Hajji would return!" she said that night to her old nurse.

"If only he would return—soon, soon!" she sobbed, a week or two later, when news had come that the governor of the eastern marches had returned to his provincial capital and was suspected of intrigues with the Ameer of the Afghans, while his twin brother, the governor of the western marches, was said to be hand in glove with a band of Persian marauders who were plundering the caravans going to Tamerlanistan.

"If only he would return!"

The words choked in her throat, and Ayesha Zemzem folded her in her withered old arms.

"Do not give wings to grief, little piece of my soul," she crooned. "It flies swiftly without them. Remember the words of the Koran that it is the dust and grime which purify the great soul. Remember, too, the ancient prophecy of thy clan!"

"Yes!" said the princess. "I remember."

From a taboret, she took the straight, simple sword that had rested across the knees of the dead Ameer during the funeral procession. Her narrow, white hand gripped the hilt.

"The old prophecy!" she whispered. "*'Out of the West he will come to save Tamerlanistan! Twin brother to the Gengizkhani through the mating of blades!'*"

She stepped to the window and looked out to where, above a sunset of somber, crushed pink, the gathering night was wrapping palace and town in her trailing cloak of black, shot with golden stars.

"Out of the West!"

And it seemed as if the West had heard, was giving answer.

A whisper seemed to come from very far, from beyond the sunset, suffusing her soul with a great sorrow and, too, a great hope and promise.

And so she stood there for a long time, listening to the silent whisper, looking out into the West, until the sun died in a sickly haze of coppery brown—decayed, it seemed, like the sun on the Day of Judgment—and the moon came up, stabbed on the outer horns of the world, dispassionate, calm, indifferent to the heart of man.

CHAPTER III

Introducing the hero of this veracious tale, also his father, his brother, and a man whose really-truly name is Preserved Higgins. A sordid note is struck.

"YES, m'lud," replied Tomps, the butler, with a certain quaking complacency.

"I know it's a bit rough," continued the old Earl of Dealle out of the depths of his armchair whose upholstery had seen better days. He leaned forward a little and lowered his voice. His keen, wrinkled, rather wicked old face was in strange contrast with his homespun Saxon name: the lips thin, the cheekbones high, the nose hawkish, exaggerated, and with flaring, nervous nostrils, the eyes beady and black, and the complexion suffused with a golden-brown tinge.

"Rather rougher on you than on me," he went on. "For I have only to eat with the creature while you have to wait on him, what? But—well—the creature has money, frightful, vulgar heaps of money, and my agent writes me he's willing to plop down a stiffish lot of the ready for the proper sort o' country estate, with ancestral portraits and ancestral defective plumbing and ancestral family spook all complete."

"I understand, m'lud."

"You jolly well ought to, Tomps. For if the creature rents Dealle Castle, there's a corkin' chance that I'll pay you the two years' wages I owe you."

"Thank you, m'lud."

"Therefore, treat him as if he were the Double Duchess—God bless her!—herself, even though his name is . . . I say, Tomps, what *is* the bounder's name?"

"Preserved Higgins, m'lud!"

The earl collapsed.

"Gracious me!" he exclaimed.

And from beneath his bushy white eyebrows he stole a glance at the possessor of the extraordinary name who was playing poker with two other men, the earl's sons by every last sign of physiognomy, in a corner of the vast, funereal, threadbare Tudor hall that gave on the sweet, yellow Sussex Downs, with a distant view of the sea that sparkled like a floor of emeralds. In back of the castle, toward Lewes and the Brighton & South Coast Railway, stretched thirty odd thousand acres of mixed farm and park land—mortgaged to the last brick, the last thatch, the last Tree of Heaven, the last, moss covered all-the-year-round—which, to quote the earl, had been in the possession of his family, the Wades of Dealle, "long before the Conqueror stuck his ugly Norman nose across the Channel."

Last night Mr. Preserved Higgins had motored down from his palatial stucco monstrosity in London's Mayfair, with a letter from Redder, his lordship's agent, to "'ave a look at the plyce. That's my w'y o' doin' business. I looks, I tykes my choice, and I p'ys my tin, wot?"

Mr. Preserved Higgins was a remarkable man in more ways than one. Of course he was a self-made

man. Everybody is, these days. Of course he dropped his *h*'ches. Everybody does, these days.

Born not far from Oxford Street, in a particularly odorous alley, once known as Hog Lane, which had given the late Mr. Hogarth a great deal of material for his scathing drawings, his early recollections had something to do with a pimply-faced, immensely stout woman who had called him "yer bleedin' little darlin' hyngel" in moments of alcoholic tenderness; to give him clouts on the side of the head when the barmaid over at the "Rose and Elephant" had put too much gin in her good-morning half pint of "swipes." His reputed father had been a sardonic navvy who had given him his Christian name of Preserved in a riotous mood because every one of his many other children had died a week or two after they had opened their lungs to the greasy soot of Hog Lane. Fate, kindly or otherwise, had *preserved* him, and the name had turned out to be singularly appropriate.

For, running away from home and board school at the ripe age of twelve and sailing before the mast to the Azores, afterwards to South Africa, he had arrived at the latter place at the high tide of the De-Beers diamond boom. Promptly he had deserted, had joined the South African Argonauts who pushed north to the *veldt,* and, to believe certain tales that were rampant in Lombard and Threadneedle and Bishopsgate Streets, had laid the foundations of his vast fortune by the nefarious process called *I. D. B.,* "illicit diamond buying" from thieving Kaffirs and Cape boys who worked in the Kimberley fields.

Since then he had *preserved* and caused to grow and

multiply every farthing that had ever come his way. Everything he touched seemed to turn into gold. To-day he was a millionaire in pounds sterling, with a palace in the Mayfair, a steam yacht in the Solent, a game preserve in Scotland, a trout stream in Norway, a shiny, white, flower-bordered villa on the Riviera, a moor in Yorkshire, a flat in Paris, and with financial interests that reached from Chicago to Algiers, from Kamchatka to Timbuktu, from Spitzbergen to the Falklands. "Land Development" was the slogan on his letter head; and there was a chance that, at the next list of royal birthday honors, if the Conservatives to whose party fund he was a generous contributor continued in power, he would become Sir Preserved Higgins, Baronet.

Short he was, pudgy, bald-headed, with a full, curly, russet beard that was always spotted with crumbs, thick lips, steel-gray eyes, and a large-pored, Hebraic nose. He still dropped his *h*'ches; made rather a point of it—perhaps from a sense of inverted snobbery.

He was shuffling the cards with agile fingers, dealt, looked at his hand, and slapped the man at his left on the shoulder with crude familiarity.

"Come on in, cockie," he said, "the water's fine. Ten—and ten—and a pony, wot?" registering his bet with chips and markers.

The one addressed as "cockie," whose real name was The Honorable Hector Wade, second son of the Earl of Dealle, winked meaningly at the third man, his older brother, The Honorable Tollemache Wade who, like himself and like their father, was dark and

lean, with angular jowl, high cheekbones, thin lips that subtended a quixotic nose, and keen, black eyes: altogether un-English; un-English, too, as to sulky, brooding, saturnine temper and sudden fits of withering, black taciturnity—all mental and physical characteristics which tradition was pleased to blame on a Castilian admiral whose ship had been wrecked on the chalky coast of Sussex at the time when the proud Armada had tried issues with Good Queen Bess and her duffel-jerkined yoemen.

Both brothers knew why Mr. Higgins was an honored guest at Dealle Castle and lent themselves to their share of the entertaining with good enough grace. They belonged to the same regiment, the Ninety-Second Dragoons, of which their father was the retired colonel and the history of which was intimately connected with that of Britain's Oriental dominions; and they thought that the verbal and social vagaries of the eccentric Cockney-South-African millionaire would make good telling at regimental mess, over the famous crusty port which had once reposed in the cellars of Napoleon the First.

Too, in the case of the older brother, there was a more strictly selfish reason.

For he was head over heels in debt. A three-cornered combination of race horses, cards and a chorus lady who called herself Gwendolyn de Vere, had eaten into his resources like acid, and Sam Lewis, the usurer of Lombard Street, had flatly refused to renew his last note for five thousand guineas. Bankruptcy, disgrace, cashiering from the army stared him in the face.

"Sorry, my boy," his father had told him that very

morning. "I can't help you. Everything's mortgaged except the family ghost. Play up to our Cockney visitor. If he takes our place for a season or two, I'll help you out. Once more," he had added, dropping his negligent manner as if it were a cloak, "once more—and for the very last time!"

"Come on in and myke your bets," said Mr. Preserved Higgins. "Ain't you got no guts?"

"I tilt that bet a pony, Mr. Higgins," said Tollemache.

"And a monkey!" countered the irrepressible millionaire, tossing a dozen chips into the pot.

"See you!" from Hector.

And the game continued while the earl sank back into his chair and picked up a certain scandalous sporting paper, black on pink, which is much more popular with the nobility and gentry—we shall not mention the upper clergy—of Merry England than Bishop Taylor's "Lives of the Saints."

He had dozed off over "Old Etonian's" comment on the county cricket averages when a sudden exclamation from Mr. Preserved Higgins startled him wide awake:

"Go'blyme! No wonder I'm losin' my plurry pants! S'y—these 'ere cards . . ."

"What is the matter with them?" Hector cut in sternly, threateningly leaning across the table, his dark, hawkish features, as they came within the radius of the low-hanging lamp, suffused with a terrible, corroding rage—the sudden, killing rage of the Wades of Dealle.

"Wot's the matter with them?" sneered the millionaire. "I'll tell you wot's the bloomin' matter with them, cully! They're marked! Somebody's been cheatin'!"

"God!"

Hector was on his feet. He looked like a panther about to pounce and tear; and Higgins rose, upsetting his chair, stepped back from the table, frightened, white as a sheet, yet obstinate, resolute, repeating over and over again:

"They're marked, them cards! Blyme—they're marked!" and, just as the earl had reached the scene of the quarrel on his staggering old legs, Tollemache threw himself between his younger brother and the Londoner.

"Keep your shirts on, both of you," he said. "You"—to Hector—"unclench that homicidal fist of yours, and you"—to the financier—"either take back what you said and see what sort of an apology you can make, or . . ."

"Or—prove it, that wot you mean? Well—you high-falutin', drawlin', blue-blooded jackanypes wot's got more cheek than 'orse sense, I will *prove* it. Bloody fine goin's-on in your 'ouse, yer lordship," he turned to the earl; "'ere I accepts yer invitytion like one gent from another, to look at yer blarsted, ruddy, poverty-stricken estyte and tyke it off'n yer 'ands for a season or two so's you can p'y back some o' yer debts—and—'ere—they asks me to pl'y—them precious sons o' yours—and the cards are . . ."

"Prove it! G—— d—— you—prove it!" Hector's face had turned a dull, coppery red. His black

eyes were contracted into slits. His nostrils quivered. He looked more un-English than ever.

"Right-oh, Dook!" said the cockney. "I'll prove it!"

And he did.

On both the packs of cards they had been using the Kings, Queens, and Aces had been carefully marked on the reverse side with tiny needle pricks.

Silence dropped like a shutter.

Then the earl turned to the financier.

"Would you mind stepping out of the room for a few minutes?" he asked, bowing, and speaking in a very low voice. "I wish to speak to my sons. Presently I shall endeavor to make you a suitable apology."

Then, as the door closed on Mr. Preserved Higgins:

"Hector, you are ruined!"

CHAPTER IV

In which it is proved that a thousand years of progressive civilization and of Christianity, meek or otherwise, have not yet succeeded in abolishing human sacrifice.

OUTSIDE, on the terrace, Mr. Preserved Higgins asked Tomps, the butler, the way to the nearest telegraph station; jumped into his roadster, hatless, coatless, and was off to the village where he flustered Miss Prudence Hutchison, the local post mistress, telegraph operator, and proprietress of a general merchandise store including everything needed from red flannels to sticky North country treacle, by sending a lengthy wire in a mad jumble of code words to an address in Upper Thames Street and, not content with having spent for it the exorbitant sum of seven and sixpence ha'penny, despatching a cablegram to a Mr. Ezra W. Warburton, 59*b* Pine Street, New York City, U. S. A., which read:

"Got you licked to a frazzle. What price Tamerlanistan now?

"(Signed) PRESERVED HIGGINS."

Inside, the Earl of Dealle faced his two sons. Gone was his slangy, nonchalant manner, his slangy, nonchalant diction.

"You are ruined, Hector," he repeated, in a

strangely detached voice, neither criminatory nor damnatory nor even angry, but stating it as a fact—a regrettable fact, but a fact.

"I beg your pardon, sir," replied Hector. "I rather fancy you are making a mistake."

He half turned toward his brother, who seemed puzzled, nonplussed, ill at ease, looking down at his remarkably well-made shoes as if trying to figure out something which he did not understand.

"Tollemache!" Hector laid a hand on his brother's shoulder. There was entreaty in his accents; too, a terrible pity, a terrible contempt. "I say—Tollemache, old chap, won't you . . .?"

The other did not reply. Slowly he looked up. Slowly he studied his brother's face, still with that same expression of puzzled, nonplussed embarrassment, while the younger brother turned to his father with an impatient gesture.

"I don't want to accuse"—he checked himself, and went on: "anybody. I am trying to play the game . . ."

"And you *will* play the game!" the earl cut in. "For you are my dear son, blood of my blood and bone of my bone. I am—oh—the word is so trite, so damnably inadequate—but I'm proud of you, my boy!"

"Proud—of me, sir? And a moment ago you said that I was ruined, didn't you? What . . ."

Suddenly Tollemache burst into speech, hectic, slurred, rather bitter:

"I don't understand. I don't know what it is all about. They were my cards. I took them from my

room. A brand-new pack with the seal unbroken, and . . ."

"Silence!" thundered his father. "You bad son! You wicked brother! You—you . . ." his voice peaked to a high-pitched, senile screech—"to cheat! At cards! Like a low Piccadilly cad—like some swine of a racetrack tout! God! To bring shame and disgrace on an honorable English name, for the sake of some damned, trashy, pinchbeck jewel for some damned, painted London harlot . . ."

"But—father! Father! Listen! I give you my word of honor that I . . ."

"Your word of *honor?* You—you cheat—you swindler—you dare speak of honor?"

"Father!"

"No, no, no! Do not deny! Do not even attempt to deny! I know. Your brother knows. That Higgins person knows. I daresay Tomps knows. But"—and frothing, corroding laughter bubbled to his lips—"don't you be afraid. The world shall never know. For—God pity me!—you are my first-born son! You are the future Earl of Dealle!"

It had always been so with the earl, with all the Wades of Dealle: a drawling, slangy, ironic outer mask, the result of Eton and the army, beneath which slumbered a lawless, turbulent personality, an atavistic throwback to the mythical Castilian ancestor that would rise like a mighty wind in his brain, suddenly, dramatically, and scotch all sobering impulses. He did not give his son a chance to speak, to explain.

"No, no! Don't say a word. And—don't fear! The world will never know!"

Then, after he had pushed the stammering, protesting, almost hysterical Tollemache across the threshold and bolted the door, he repeated his last words:

"The world must never know, Hector!"

"You don't think Higgins can be persuaded to keep mum?"

"Not his sort of cad. He hates—*us*, our class, because he came up from some reeking gutter while we have the infernal impudence of knowing who our grandfathers were. I'll try. I'll talk to him. But—"

"You think it will be useless?"

"I know it will be. Hector! You must play the game. Tollemache is my first-born son. Some day he will be the Earl of Dealle. And it must never be said that an earl of Dealle cheated at cards!"

Hector stood quite still. He stared at his father out of his black, opaque eyes. Something naked reached out and touched his soul, leaving the chill of an indescribable uneasiness.

"You mean," he asked slowly, haltingly, "that—because I am the younger son . . ."

"It is our tradition, Hector! The tradition of the Wades of Dealle! In a way, the tradition of England: service, courage, sacrifice!"

"Sacrifice!" Hector picked up the word like a battle gage. "I don't fancy I'm worse than the average coward, sir. I s'pose I'll stand the gaff when it comes to sacrificing my blood, my life. But—my pride? My honor?"

"Yes! Even that!"

Hector stared straight ahead of him. He was

young, just a little over twenty-five, with all the world's hope and glory and golden promise opening before him like a flower. Never before had he known the crude definitiveness of personal sorrow, personal grief, despair. He realized fully what it would mean to him if he obeyed his father. He would be kicked out of his regiment, his club. Society, from Aspley House to Lambeth Palace, from the Horse Guards' Tilt-Yard to Rotten Row, from the Oval to Newmarket Heath, would turn its back on him. He would be a pariah.

All that he understood. But it was when he thought of his brother that the harrow drove most deeply over his soul. He had always been fond of him; had always admired him for his skill with cricket bat and polo mallet; had looked up to him with boyish hero worship.

And now . . .

"I'll do it, father," he said coldly; and left the room.

Outside, he met his brother. The latter tried to stop him.

"Hector—listen . . ."

The younger man shook his head.

"I shall bear the blame because"—he said it half proudly, half sneeringly—"there is our old tradition. But—I do not want to see you again—ever, ever! Neither you, nor father—nor England!"

"But, Hector! You don't for a moment believe that I would cheat at cards, do you?"

"If you didn't, who did?" came the other's terse counter question, and he rushed past his brother, down

the terrace, toward the thatched roofs of Dealle Village that dropped to the south in gold and mauve steps. He passed the Queen Anne garden, the coursing field, and the racing paddock, and stopped in front of a weather-beaten sixteenth century building that caught the slanting rays of the western sun with deep porch and oriel windows, and that dead generations of Wades had used for a banqueting hall.

To-day it did service for a lumber room.

Hector opened the door, bolted it behind him, lit a couple of great wrought-iron lanterns that swung from brackets, and walked straight to the farther wall.

It was covered with trophies from many lands: Zulu assegais; Metabele knobkerries, long gadyami swords from Arabia with tapering blades and clumsy, wooden handles; double-barreled guns from the Persian Gulf, the sort which the Gulf Arabs call *bandukyiah bi rulayin,* or "two-mouthed guns"; murderous Khyberee knives; cheray daggers from Afghanistan; crooked Turkoman yataghans; throwing-knives from Tripoli and Tunis; and many other weapons—all silent, steely witnesses to the warlike prowess of many generations of the Wades of Dealle.

In the center, sheathed in moth-eaten crimson velvet studded with uncut, semi-precious stones, there was a short, broad blade with a silver hilt.

He took it down and unsheathed it.

It was about a foot long, leaflike in shape, and nine inches across half way between hilt and tapering point. Hilt as well as blade were covered with a delicate, in-

laid gold pattern that the Hand of Time had wiped into an indistinct blur.

As his sensitive, groping fingers touched the naked steel, he had the sudden impression of if something in his brain was being wrenched violently loose from its fastenings. It was as if his entire soul life and soul understanding were shifting within him with utter completeness. At that moment, something quite lonely, quite ancient, and quite untamed seemed to be born within him, or, rather, reborn. A new perception of life came to him, certain new and massive sensations which he felt instinctively, without being able to classify or to describe them.

It has been so ever since he could remember, ever since, an Eton "oppidan" home on vacation, he had found the ancient blade in the lumber room.

Whenever he touched the blade, *It*—that was the name he had given the unknown sensation during his boyhood years—would suddenly flash down upon him with terrific force, with the strength of wind and sun and sea and the stars. He would feel himself caught in a huge, irresistible whirlpool that swept out of the womb of the past, and back into the present—the future!

Once he had spoken of it to his father—he had been about fifteen at the time—and his father had dismissed it with a hooting bellow of laughter and an unkind allusion to "growing pains—what you need, my boy, is more cricket and less thinking. It ain't good form to think so jolly much, you know!"

But he had always felt, felt now, that the blade had a meaning in his life.

It had a message to bring to him. A half-forgotten message—and—yes!—it came out of the East, with a great whirring of wings.

He shuddered. He sheathed the blade, was about to put it back amongst the trophies on the wall.

Then he reconsidered, and slipped it into the deep inside pocket of his coat, left the lumber room, and returned to the house.

He found it in a turmoil, with Mr. Perserved Higgins in the entrance hall, well within hearing of the servants' quarters, laying down the law to the earl:

"Harsk me to keep mum, do you, because o' the scandal, yer lordship, wot? Well—it ain't a go, old 'un! I was cheated. Cheated at cards—so 'elp me! By that there lousy son o' yours with 'is bleedin' airs and you-be-damned gryces! Gawd stroike me pink—but London's goin' to 'ear about these 'ere goin's-on!"

And London did.

That night, after his return to town, Mr. Perserved Higgins told the tale to his favorite barmaid at the downstairs Criterion. She repeated it to a junior captain in the Blues. He told his mother who told the old Duchess of Clonmonnell who told all the world.

Mayfair and Belgravia and Marlborough House and Hydepark Corner cackled and jeered.

"I say, Vic dear, have you heard about young Hector Wade?"

"Rather! Disgraceful, don't you think, darling Millicent?"

"Rather rough on his nibs, the old earl." This from a subaltern in the Buffs. "Stony down to his

last farthing, I gather. And Tollemache makin' no end of a donkey of himself over that chorus girl with the unlikely hair—can't think of her name—Gwen—something or other, *you* know. And now Hector gone to the jolly old bow-wows. Frightfully hard lines on the old Lord-bless-me, what?"

Thus the beginning; and, two days later, Hector Wade's letter to the War Office asking permission to resign his commission crossed a letter from his colonel, Sir Samuel Greatorex, asking him to send in his resignation.

Late that afternoon he left the house of his ancestors and walked out on the Sussex Downs. Dealle Village lay before him, like a snug, gray nest in the yellow hollow, with the dying sun blazing orange high-lights and purple shadows on cottage face and limestone path and hatch. Then he turned east, to the little garden the other side of the dairy which had been his dead mother's favorite place. It was a mass of roses, creepers as well as bushes scrambling and growing in their own strong-willed fashion, clothing stones with hearts of deep ruby, building arches of glowing pink and tea yellow against the dark blue sky, lifting shy, single, dewy heads in hushed corners.

Slightly self-conscious, slightly ashamed of the action he picked a gloire-de-Dijon bud and put it in his button hole.

Then he turned down the blue gravel path toward the railway station at Dealle-Plumpton Crossings, in his right hand a small kit bag that held the few belongings, just simple necessaries, he was taking with him.

He had seen his father at tea earlier in the afternoon.

The old earl had offered him money, letters to friends in Canada or at the Cape.

But Hector had shaken his head, stubbornly, resolutely.

"I want nothing, father," he had said. "I am through with"—making a sweeping gesture—"all this!"

"You are through with—me?"

The earl had stretched out a withered, appealing old hand. But Hector had disregarded it.

"Yes, father," he had replied, simply, chillily.

And so he left the home of his ancestors, carrying with him nothing except the small kit bag, the ancient blade that pressed against his heart, and—memories.

He left no address behind; when Tollemache that morning had tried to speak to him, he had turned his back on him without a word; and nobody saw him go, except Tomps, the butler.

The latter was fingering a five-pound note which Mr. Preserved Higgins had given him with the promise that there was another five pounds waiting for him if he wired Mr. Higgins on what day and by what train Hector Wade was leaving Dealle. He saw no reason why he should not earn that five pounds. He followed Hector at a safe distance, saw that he was taking the five forty-five for Waterloo Station, and wired Mr. Higgins accordingly. It was delivered to the millionaire simultaneously with a cable from his confidential agent in New York telling him that the telegram he had sent to Mr. Ezra W. Warburton, 59*b*

Pine Street a few days earlier had been cabled back to London, as the addressee had sailed for the latter place six days earlier and was just about due at his favorite hotel there, the Savoy.

A jumble of news, which caused Mr. Preserved Higgins to do a great deal of rapid figuring and dovetailing.

When Hector Wade left the train at Waterloo and had himself driven to a small, cheap hotel in Moor Street, in the reeking heart of Soho, he was not aware that a short, stocky, sandy-haired man who worked in Upper Thames Street for a mythical party whose cable address was *"Gloops,"* was shadowing him in another taxicab.

Nor was he aware that, shortly afterwards, a lengthy code cablegram was sent to Babu Bansi, at Teheran, giving the latter several intricate instructions with regard to a certain Princess Aziza Nurmahal who seemed to rule a country called Tamerlanistan.

Even had he known, it would have made little difference to him. In fact, he would not have been quite sure if Tamerlanistan was the name of a rug or of the latest American cocktail.

CHAPTER V

In which a russet-haired girl from New York comes into the tale and in which, furthermore, the blade flashes free, putting several low knaves to rout.

LIKE many others of Britain's leading families, the Wades of Dealle, though of "county" stock, were more intimately connected with the Orient than with the yellow Sussex wold where they had settled in the days of Hengist and Horsa.

Generation after generation, they had assisted at the clouting of England's imperial fortunes in India. They had fought—and bravely fought—in the early wars of the Honorable John Company, against Moghuls, Sikhs, Burmans, Mahrattas, Persians, Afghans, Rohilkands, and innumerable border tribes. Hector's great-grandfather had saved General Napier's life in the battle of Moodkee by interposing his arm, and losing it at the wrist, when a warrior was about to bring down the *togha,* the brutal, crooked, short sword of the Sikh, on the general's head; his grandfather had been one of the immortal band of heroes who blew up the Delhi powder magazine, and incidentally themselves, when the 38th and 54th Sepoy regiments massacred their white officers and carried the flame of the mutiny into the heart of Delhi; his father had earned the V. C. as he marched with Lord Roberts' columns from Kabul to Kandahar.

Too, generation after generation, they had been born in India. Both Hector and his brother had first seen the light of day in some stinking, miasmic Central Indian cantonment, and they had never forgotten a word of the native dialect which their brown Behari nurse had taught them before they had learned a word of English. Not only that. There was, furthermore, an old tradition, its original cause lost in the mists of the past, by which every Wade of Dealle was given a thorough grounding in Persian, the language which is to the polite Moslem elements of India and Central Asia what French was to the European society of a generation earlier.

Thus India had always been home to them. Perhaps more than home. It seemed axiomatic that the land which they had mulched with their blood, the land where they had fought and suffered and conquered and achieved and died, should mean more to them than the soft, rational commonplaces of that Sussex which to-day was nothing to them but a sentimental memory—mortgaged to the hilt.

And it was of India that Hector thought, almost instinctively, as he left Waterloo Station, with the sandy-haired gentleman's of Upper Thames Street taxicab rolling along in his wake.

India! Rather, all the glittering, resplendent, improbable East!

He had not been there since he was a child, and his five years in the Dragoons had all been spent in English and Irish barracks and cantonments.

But, as his machine whirred away, clear through

the jarring clonk of the County Council's surface lines, the yelping whistle of penny steamers, the sardonic hooting of lumbering, topheavy motorbuses, the strident tinkling of costermongers' bells—clear through the thousand motley cries of gutter and pavement, through the maze and reek and riot of the sordid London streets, he heard the call of Asia.

Asia—which had always given honor and preferment and a square chance to the Wades of Dealle!

Asia—the Mother—to which he turned now, in his hour of disgrace and despair!

Not that these were the exact thoughts in his brain. For he was a rational enough young Englishman for all his high cheekbones and black, opaque eyes; and if his own, inner, secret consciousness had whispered to him just then that a mysterious, invisible force was tugging at his heart-strings and that the silent soul of all the East was whirring about his own soul, trying to edge into it, to merge with it—if his inner, secret consciousness had whispered to him any of these things, he would have entered the nearest chemist's shop and bought himself a round six-penny box filled with Mr. Beecham's renowned pills.

But the fact remained that, an hour after he had registered at the Shaftesbury Hotel in Moor Street, with the sandy-haired gentleman in close attendance, he turned toward the Docks, East of the Tower, where the steamship offices are open until late at night, to book a passage on the first P. & O. steamer for Calcutta.

Every penny he possessed in the world, about fifty

pounds all told but for a few odd shillings and pence in his trousers, was in his inside coat pocket in incongruous proximity to the strange old Asian blade which he had taken from the lumber room, and he smiled grimly at the thought that a pickpocket would have a surprise in store for him if his nimble fingers went groping where they were not wanted. For that morning, obeying a rather boyish impulse, he had sharpened the point of the dagger with his razor strop, and the red velvet sheath was worn thin and threadbare.

Rapidly he walked down Ratcliffe Highway, past "model tenements" that hide their feculent, maggoty souls behind white stucco fronts, past Jamrach's world-famed "Wild Beast Shop" where the spectacled proprietor boasts that, on a day's notice, he can sell you any animal from a white Siamese elephant to a blue Tibetan bear, past Donald M'Eachran's "Murray Arms" saloon bar where a nostalgic Highlander sells the London equivalent for Athol Brose, and turned into Shadwell's smelly, greasy, gin-soaked purlieus.

Here, Wapping and the East India and Commercial and Victoria Docks spilled over with taverns and sailors' boarding-houses and ship-chandlers' and second-hand stores where every last mildewy curio a sailor, for reasons only known to himself, packs in his dunnage, from Korean brass to broken bits of Yünan jade, from white Gulf corals to bundles of yellow Latakia tobacco leaves, can be bought. Too, men from all the corners of the globe; men who go down to the sea in ships and come up from the sea, as often as not, in hansom cabs to spend the bitter wages of six weeks' battling with storm and rotten timbers in one night's

scarlet spree amongst the pubs and the girls of sneering Limehouse.

Silence folded about him like a cloak as he passed into deserted St. Katherine's; the stark, humming silence of a great city asleep. The black London evening dawn huddled the houses together in gray, shapeless groups. Lights flickered up, were quickly shuttered.

Then the houses whispered secrets to each other—secrets into the trooping shadows. . . .

The squeaking, grating tread of some night wanderer shuffling along on patched shoes vanished into the memory of sound, while the east wind came booming up the Thames, trailing a mantle of diaphanous, ochreous fog and dimming the houses with a veil almost of romance.

Romance of the Docks, where brown Laskar and sooty Seedee-boy and yellow Chinaman finds that his money gives him the rollicking, ribald waterfront equality which the forecastle denies him!

Romance that starts with a double drink of gin and perhaps a chandoo pipe in the back room of a Wapping tavern and winds up, quite possibly, in a perambulator with a half-breed child peeping out, wonderingly, protestingly!

Brutal, sordid romance—romance of knife and pistol and thudding blackjack!

Blood-stained romance. . . .

"Help!"

The cry stabbed through the air; shivered; choked;

was echoed by another, a woman's "Oh—oh—pl—" broken off in midair, and followed by a gurgle, the sound of blows, a quick, acrid whisper in twangy Cockney:

"Aw! you will, will you? Tyke that!"

"Gawd, Bill! The gell's bit my bleedin' 'and. . . . 'Ere—stop it, or—go'blyme . . ."

"Cough up, old cock!"

With the first cry for help, Hector had wheeled in the direction whence it had come—an alley, to the left and slightly in back of him that opened between the squatting, leering houses like a sinister, black maw. A moment later he had rushed into the alley. A dozen yards up, he saw half-a-dozen rough men, typical as to peaked caps and flopping corduroys, holding a well-dressed, elderly man and a young girl, while another rough was relieving them of their valuables. All that he saw in the fraction of a second quite clearly, for a double gas jet was hanging from some mysterious recess over a stable postern, lending to the scene an unearthly light—a sheen of bluish green—like the blue on the green of young cabbages, the ludicrous thought came to him—

A second later he had reached the group, his fists going like flails . . . "Regular bloomin' young Berserker, he was," the sandy-haired gentleman, who was still shadowing him and who watched it all from the corner, reported shortly afterwards to Mr. Preserved Higgins, "and, I say, for a moment he had them bluffed."

But not for long.

The one who was going through his victims' pockets straightened up, caught Hector's fist with his open left palm, and called to two of the others:

"'Ere, Bill—'Enery! Lend us a 'and!"

And the three went for Hector, employing tactics quite unknown to the late lamented Marquis of Queensberry, and it looked desperate for Hector Wade.

He dodged and danced and grappled. His breath came in short, staccato bursts. At one and the same time he was trying to land blow, to parry blow, to sidestep kicking feet and crashing elbows, and to gain the side of the man and the girl, and the odds were against him; a rough knuckle caught him on the left temple, an open palm hit the point of his chin, the man called 'Enery dodged within the very crook of Hector's powerful right arm, and grappled, the others closing in the next moment like hounds pulling down a stag. Hector felt himself seized about the chest under the armpits by a bearlike grasp. For a second he felt as if his ribs were crushing in his lungs. A sickening smell of gin and sweat and rank tobacco rose to his nostrils. His temples throbbed. The roof of his mouth felt parched.

Grappling, straining, cursing, he fell to the ground, 'Enery on top of him, Bill booting him in the ribs, the third man dancing about, watching his chance for a knockout blow. He shot his fist to Hector's jaw, bending down; but the latter jerked his head back in the nick of time; and, the next second, with a sudden, hard bunching of muscles, he pinioned 'Enery's arms to his sides, spread his strong legs, and tried desperately

to pull himself on top. He was succeeding in this when 'Enery, with a wolfish snarl, sank his teeth in his ears.

"Damn you!" Hector shrieked with rage and pain. "You'll pay for this!"

And, with a great jerk and heave, he freed himself, sending 'Enery crashing into Bill, Bill into the third man, jumped back, and reached in his inside pocket for the ancient blade.

He did it instinctively, unthinkingly. Hitherto, by the token of his English blood and training, by the token of an English gentleman's strange, wonderful, foolish prejudices, he had still been fighting according to the unwritten Anglo-Saxon rules, had still been playing the game, had refused to use fist or elbow or hit below the belt.

Now, suddenly, inside of his brain, something like a colored glass ball burst into a thousand iridescent splinters. His careful English training, his English restraint, his English prejudices, danced away in a mad whirligig of passion, and the blade leaped to his hand like a sentient being, flashed free of the velvet scabbard, caught the haggard rays of the gas jets so that the point of it glittered like a cresset of evil passions.

He used it like a rapier, with carte and tierce, with lunge and thrust and counterthrust and quick, staccato ripost, pinking here a leg, there a grimy hand, and ripping through tough corduroy as with the edge of a razor.

In and at them, with a stamping of feet, a harsh, guttural cry!

On guard! Again carte and tierce and lightning-like feint!

And, clear through, he had the strange impression that it was not his hand which was the blade's master, but that the blade was directing his hand, was stiffening or crooking his arm as he lunged to the attack, or estrapaded sideways, or feinted to parry clumsy, ineffectual blows and kicks. The hilt throbbed and quivered in his hand, while the point of the dagger danced a mad, swishing, triumphant saraband, there, in the reeking, sordid London night, with the gas jets hiccoughing sardonically, as if the weapon's ancient, turbulent, wicked soul had awakened from the clogging sleep of centuries.

"Gawd A'mighty!" yelled 'Enery. "The blighter's gone clean off 'is noodle!"

And he was the first to seek safety in flight, while the others followed as fast as they could, and disappeared, shouting and crying and cursing, in the direction of the East India Docks.

Hector was about to rush after them, the blood-stained dagger still flickering in front of him, when a golden ripple of laughter caused him to stop short and turn.

It was the girl. She was clutching her companion's arm in a paroxysm of merriment.

"I—oh—I am so sorry," she stammered as Hector, naked dagger in his right hand, reached her side. "I—I guess I am frightfully rude. I should thank you instead of laughing at you. . . ."

"Jane!" said the man with her.

"I know, dad. It's wretchedly rude of me. But" —again she laughed—"you were such a funny, incongruous figure—running down the alley! In your proper English clothes—with your proper bowler hat —and that murderous knife in your hand! It's Oriental, isn't it?"

"Jane!" her father admonished again. "Where are your manners?"

The girl, who was small, but strong and full-bosomed, with a silken mesh of reddish gold hair tumbling over her forehead from beneath her tight-fitting toque, a large, generous mouth, an impertinent, retroussé nose, and deep-set, hazel brown eyes, winked the tiniest little wink at Hector as if to say: "*We* understand, you and I! *We* are both young! And it *was* funny! Come on! Own up to it!" while her father thanked Hector in dignified terms.

"I don't know what would have happened to us if it had not been for your timely succor," he wound up, in an exact, slightly monotonous voice and carefully chosen phraseology which stamped him as a transatlantic visitor as surely as his sober worsted suit, the meticulous crease in his trousers, and his shoes.

Hector Wade did what any other young Englishman of his class, self-conscious, shy, proud, would have done. That is, he muttered some perfectly inane words about it not mattering—honestly!—it isn't worth fussin' about, you know!—and tried to make a graceful exit. Which was rather difficult considering that, in the embarrassment of the moment, he had forgotten all about the blade which was still in his

right hand, and so he nearly cut his face when he lifted his hat.

The result was to be expected. Once more the girl burst into laughter. But, at once, seeing that Hector was blushing and decidedly unhappy, she checked her mirth and held out an impulsive hand—to withdraw it immediately with the exclamation:

"Do put that knife away!"

Hector obeyed.

"Now then!" said the girl, and their hands met and clasped.

"It was bully of you," she went on. "Perfectly, thrillingly bully. And the next time I persuade dad to roam with me at night through this part of London —I made him, you see. We only got here from home —which is New York—a day ago. Yes—the next time I take him for a night stroll I shall insist on having you as a bodyguard—you and that weapon of yours."

"There won't be any next time," said her father, unsmiling; and—by this time they had reached the corner of St. Katherine where, in the shadow of a doorway, the sandy-haired gentleman was hiding and listening—he introduced himself: Mr. Ezra W. Warburton.

"Not to forget Mr. Ezra W. Warburton's only child and daughter Jane!" chimed in the girl.

Hector fumbled for a card, found none, and was grateful for it a moment later. For, almost at once, he decided that he would not tell these people his right name—the name which carried shame and disgrace and social ostracism.

He chose the first name he could think of. It was Smith. Of course. Charles Smith.

Somehow, it seemed very natural that Hector should forget the errand which had brought him to the Docks; natural, too, that he should accompany his new friends to their hotel, the Savoy; natural, finally, that he should accept Mr. Ezra Warburton's invitation to come upstairs to their suite, seconded by his daughter's "Do come, Mr. Smith. I know you need a brushing down, and I have an idea you need a drink."

"I accept both with pleasure," smiled Hector.

There was a glow in his heart. The world did not seem so black after all; and it was all because of a girl's hazel-brown eyes, because there was a sweet curve to her upper lip and a quick, whimsical lift at the corners.

Had anybody told him just then that he had fallen head-over-heels in love with her, at first sight, Hector would have dismissed the implication as "bally, asinine drivel." For typically English was he in this, that he treated the softer emotions with a scornful disregard, as if they were a rather vulgar convention submitted to by the masses of irresponsible mankind, which included, at least in this application, all the Continental Europeans and most of the Irish; also some of the Welsh. He did not know that this viewpoint was a pose in self-defense of his shyness and that emotional cold-bloodedness is as a rule an affectation which deceives nobody. Nor did he know that the terrible, corroding Puritanism into which he had dieted himself had not altogether scotched his inmost, smoldering, natural passions.

But he did know, as he followed the Warburtons upstairs, that in all the world there was nothing quite as becoming to a creamy complexion and reddish gold hair than a snug toque, made of the breast plumage of a pheasant, and a severely tailored suit of peacock blue serge.

Downstairs, in the meantime, the sandy-haired gentleman was frantically ringing up a number in the Mayfair.

"Are you there—are you there? Mr. Higgins!" He talked furiously across the wires for several seconds. "Right-oh, guv'nor. He's with the Warburtons at this very moment. Yes. Of course. It was an accident. Old Warburton didn't stage that holdup so's to meet young Hickamadoodle—he ain't that sort—I know. But remember—the female of the species! What do I mean? I mean that the old codger has a daughter—and, my word, ain't she the peaches and cream, though! And that Babu blighter who works for the Anglo-Indian Cable Company at Tamerlanistan *is* Warburton's agent, and he *may* find out that. . . . You'll be right down? You'd better. For if that Babu finds out, and if that Yankee gets on young Wade's buttered and marmaladed side, your name is . . . MUD!" he shouted into Central's indignant ear, for Mr. Preserved Higgins had already slammed down the receiver, and was running through his genuine Spanish Renaissance drawing-room, past his simon-pure Louis Seize bed-room, into his guaranteed Neo-Gothic reception hall where he yelled at the Italian

footman to tell the Swiss gate porter to instruct the French chauffeur to come with the Rolls-Royce.

"Step on your gas, Gastong! The Savoy! 'Urry up, sonny!"

And shortly afterwards, the big car was purring toward the Embankment and to the strident London caravanserai where to-day the Peerage and the Beerage, Montana Copper Kings and South African Diamond Magnates, Clyde Ship Builders and Omaha Pork Specialists rub elbows and swap drinks and lies—and where once the Black Prince competed in chivalry with the captive King John of France, and where Chaucer was married to the Lady Philippa de Ruet, with John o' Gaunt playing best man.

CHAPTER VI

Showing, amongst other rather drab things, how the spell of the blade begins to work, and introducing a shrewd-eyed, gentle old man out of the East.

It was known from Wall Street to Bartholomew Lane, from the Rue Lafitte to the Nevsky Pospekt, from the cotton exchange of New Orleans to the wool exchange of Melbourne, that there was no love lost between the two Land Development Kings, Mr. Ezra W. Warburton of New York City and Mr. Preserved Higgins of the British Empire in general. Not that their mutual antipathy was in any way national, international rather, since a good half of the former's backers were British, while the latter's financial co-defendants were as often as not from the more exuberant sections of the United States, Chicago and San Francisco and Seattle and Kansas City.

Their enmity, though it affected their business relations, had not even been caused by a business quarrel, but by a fundamental difference in character—*and* that codified outgrowth of character called breeding. Destined ultimately to become as notorious, and quite as destructive, as the Harriman-Hill feud, it had started at the occasion of a dinner given by the great Paris banker, M. Adolphe Bischoffsheim, with the intention of bringing the two together, during which, in a hilarious mood which was both alcoholic and atavistic,

the eccentric Cockney-South-African millionaire had poured a bottle of vintage champagne over the New Yorker's bald, dignified head, exclaiming:

"'Erewith I baptize you Hemperor of Dollars and Cents! Drink 'earty, cocky!"

Warburton had never forgotten the "outrageous insult," as he styled it, had fought the other tooth and nail since then, in many a Homeric, financial battle, and had refused ever to see him again, Mr. Preserved Higgins retaliating in kind. Both men were cursed with a full-blown vanity, the result of their too-big success. In both, the selfish battle for ever more money and power had finally left no room for any outside interests, for abstract enthusiasms or abstract ideals; and it is an interesting commentary on modern financial history to consider that the congenital pettiness of the two commercial giants—for they *were* giants—had turned their passionate, even admirable crusade after success and might into a mean wreaking of personal malice, with the public and similar small fry paying the piper as often as not.

When Mr. Preserved Higgins arrived at the Savoy, he knew better than to have himself announced, since he was sure that the American would not see him on any pretext. Instead, by the indirect method of his chauffeur and a subsidized boy in buttons, he found out the number of his rival's suite, and went upstairs, rather an odd figure with his russet, crumb-spotted beard and his choice of attire which, from rainproof burberry coat to galoshes, was gloomily barometric and rationally Londonesque.

Fourteen was the number of the Warburton's apartment, and Mr. Preserved Higgins pressed his ear against the keyhole.

Three voices drifted through—Mr. Warburton's measured, rather pompous accents, a woman's, presumably his daughter's, and Hector Wade's. Whereupon the millionaire, without more ado, opened the door, which was unlocked, with a hearty "Wot-ho! O'Connor, old socks!" looked for the mythical O'Connor, found him not at all, mumbled lying words about having come to the wrong room, waved an apologetic hand, and made as if to retrace his steps.

It was at this moment, evidently for the first time, he seemed to become aware of the younger man's identity, and, having heard from the sharp-eared gentleman with the sandy hair that Hector, back in the alley near St. Katherine, had chosen Charles Smith as a *nom de guerre,* it was natural that Mr. Preserved Higgins should come out with a part hearty, part surprised "'Ullo, Wade! An' wot are *you* doin' 'ere, 'obnobbin' with the Hemperor of Dollars and Cents and 'er Royal 'Ighness the Crown Princess?"

He had guessed exactly right.

For "Wade?" exclaimed the girl. "Why, I thought you said your name was Smith?"

Hector turned a deep red. He stammered something about it being rather hard to explain, and Mr. Preserved Higgins decided that now was the psychological, also the logical, moment to play trumps.

Quite dignifiedly, he turned to the American who, during the preceding, had maintained a stony silence,

satisfying himself with pointing steadily and meaningly at the door after he had recognized his impromptu visitor.

"'Arf a mo', Mr. Warburton," began the Cockney.

"Yes, Mr.—oh—Higgins?"—chillily.

"Mr. Warburton," went on the other, "I bloomin' well knows that you don't like me worth a blarsted damn—if the lydy will forgive my French—and I can't say as I would die of 'eart failure if you'd kick the bucket to-morrow, nor ain't I denyin' as I'd jolly well do you a 'ole lot in the heye if I 'ad 'arf a fair chance. But"—he continued with a magnificent lack of logic—"I ain't the sort to bear a grudge. Not me, so 'elp me! And so I sez to you that if this 'ere Wade or Smith or Brown or Robinson or wotever 'e calls 'is bleedin' self is tryin' to get you into a jolly little gyme of two 'anded poker, my advice to you is wot Punch sed to the young fellow about to be married: *'Don't!'* Because 'e's a thimblerigger—a lousy card sharp! 'E pl'ys with marked cards, see?"

Mr. Preserved Higgins never knew how near to death he was at that moment. For, suddenly, all sobering impulses had ebbed away from Hector's brain, leaving it vacant and dry and crimson, bringing him to the very abyss of raving, tearing, killing brutality.

Just as suddenly he controlled himself. He relaxed his bunched muscles, unclenched his fists. He had promised his father that he would carry on the old tradition of the Wades of Dealle, that, to the end of life, he would bear his brother's guilt. He was helpless, and he knew it.

But, instinctively, his eyes sought the girl's.

"What—what do you mean?" she stammered, simultaneously with her father's "Mr. Wade! Or—Smith! Will you kindly . . ."

"Explain?" sneered Mr. Preserved Higgins. "There ain't such a bloomin' lot to explain. I tell you 'e's been kicked out of 'is club and drummed out of 'is regiment and broken the 'eart of 'is dotin' father, the Earl of Dealle, not to mention my own 'eart, because 'e 'as cheated at cards!"

"Cheated whom?"

"Me!"

"Oh," said the girl, "then it is a question of personal malice?"

"Call it wot you will, lydy. But it's the truth. Arsk 'is nibs 'imself if you don't believe me!"

And, to the girl's silent question—it was all in her eyes, the helpless, pitiful clasping of her narrow hands—Hector inclined his head and walked to the door. On the threshold he turned. He caught the girl's eye—it was moist with tears and a terrible, aching appeal.

Then words came to her.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"Yes," Hector replied, steadily, and left the room, Mr. Preserved Higgins following.

Like a man in a dream, he walked downstairs, out of the hotel and into the street that stretched from the Embankment to the dim outlines of Parliament in a gentle curve of lights, when, at the corner, he was stopped by the Cockney millionaire.

"Wade," said the latter, "now that you see that

you're bloomin' well down and hout, s'pose we talks business. I repeat wot I sed to the Hemperor of Dollars and Cents upstairs. I ain't the sort to bear a grudge. And I want to 'elp you myke your w'y in the world, and I can give you a tip 'ow to myke oodles of the ready—thousands and thousands of guineas—guineas, mark you, not pounds! I needs a young lad like you. You see, there's a country over in Asia called Tamerlanistan—and the young princess wot rules it . . ."

That's as far as he got.

For, at that very moment, the younger man's fist struck him square between the eyes. He dropped like a log; and, for several minutes, until the crimson-coated, gold-gallooned commissionaire of the Savoy Hotel dashed a glass of water in his face, Mr. Preserved Higgins was oblivious to everything except a motley and brilliant collection of shooting stars that suffused his brains; while Hector, employing tactics he had learned at rugger football, sidestepped a policeman and an intoxicated gentleman in evening dress, catapulted between two costermongers, a man-o'-war's man, three ladies with bedraggled ostrich plumes on on their hats, a Cheapside Hebrew who sold baked potatoes, and a sightseeing Wessex yeoman in velveteens, and beat a strategic retreat toward Soho.

It was now too late to return to the East India Docks and find out about passage to Calcutta; but he was more firmly resolved than ever that he must put as many miles as possible, not only between himself and England, the England of "county" and Belgravia and the Badminton Club and the Ninety-Second Dra-

goons which, rightly as he added bitterly in his thoughts, had cast him out as a cad, but between himself and Jane Warburton. For, quite suddenly, and with a sort of savage, hurtful pride, he knew that he loved her, that he wanted and needed her, that she was dearer to him than the dwelling of kings. His love was as his hate, like Autumn rain, the kind which one does not see but which one feels, unceasing, penetrating, slightly chilling, and he knew that if she should ask him again: "Is it true? Did you cheat at cards?" there would be the terrible temptation to reply:

"No. I took the blame—before the world. But it was my brother Tollemache who marked the pack."

And there was the promise he had given to his father, and all his stiff, surly, wiredrawn moral rectitude with which to back it up.

"I can never see her again!"

He said it with a loud voice, very much to the surprise, followed by ribald comments, of half-a-dozen cab drivers huddled around a coffee stand on the south side of Soho Square.

India!

There lay the solution. Now more than ever; and he went straight to his shabby hotel in Moor Street and made ready for bed.

The next moment he was face to face with a catastrophe. The fifty pounds, every penny he possessed in the world with the exception of a few shillings in his trousers, had disappeared from his coat.

His first impulse was to blame the roughs whom

he had fought in the alley for the loss, but a short examination told him that, indirectly, it was the ancient blade which had played thief. Putting it back, he must have rammed it down too hard; it had bitten through the thin, threadbare velvet sheath, had made a neat slit in the pocket lining, and the money had dropped through.

Not for a second did he consider asking his father for assistance. Not for a second did he give up his plan of going to Calcutta by the first steamer.

"If I can't go first class," he said to himself, "I'll go steerage—Asiatic steerage if I have to."

And then, with that dry, rather grim humor, typically English in its way, disconcerting, incongruous, bobbing up in moments of emotional stress, acting as a safety valve as it were:

"You stole my money," addressing the blade which flickered ironically beneath the lamp-light, "and now you are going to pay for it—and serve you jolly well right!"

He weighed it in his hand, and, continuing his soliloquy:

"I have been told that there's nothing you can't buy or sell in London, for the right price, from the Koh-i-noor to a paper of Yankee chewing gum. Very well. Let's see if there's a market for thieving, dishonest Oriental blades!"

He had no other valuables. His watch was a simple silver half-hunter; and the few shillings in his trousers were just about enough to pay for his room and perhaps a drink. He decided that he needed that drink right now, and went down to the old-fashioned saloon

bar with its two or three dozen oaken, strong-backed chairs that stood round against the farther wall, each fitted with its genial occupant—cab drivers and small tradesmen of the vicinity; the black settle where the pompous landlord presided and gave his opinion on politics, cricket, and the lamentable shortcomings of the County Council; the neat, sanded floor; the small, round window high up on the wall, with a wheel ventilator in one of the panes.

"A mug of bitters," he called to the bar maid, sat down, and picked up a copy of the *Times* which a former occupant of the chair had left.

Idly he turned to the second page. Square in its center was a large advertisement printed in heavy, extravagant Gothic type. He read, read again, sat up straight, tore off the page, crammed it in his pocket, and rose.

"I say!" he shouted excitedly to the bar maid. "Never mind that mug of bitters!"—and he picked up his hat and ran out of the saloon bar, the hotel, and away across Soho Square as fast as his legs would let him, while the landlord looked after him, open-eyed, open-mouthed.

"I don't know wot this 'ere young generytion is comin' to," he said, disapprovingly, to his neighbor, Tom Jenks, the glazier. "Well—never mind—Lloyd George, as I was a-sayin' of just now, will ruin England as sure as . . ."

Hector, meanwhile, had come to a stop beneath a lamp post that squinted down on the oozy London pavement with a yellow, arrogant eye.

He took the advertisement from his pocket and read it over again.

It was short and to the point:

"Blades bought! Oriental blades! Top prices paid for the right sort! OPEN FOR BUSINESS DAY AND NIGHT!
"Ali Yusuf Khan, 356 Coal Yard Street, Drury Lane."

"Open for business day and night?" thought Hector. "Well—it seems that Mr. Ali Yusuf Khan is as anxious to buy them as I am to sell this particular one."

He caught a green bus, dropped off at Drury Lane, and turned into Coal Yard Street, that ancient, crooked alley still fragrant with memories of Nell Gwynne and, too, with the names rather less ambrosial, of Jack Sheppard and the Round House.

It was deserted but for a mangy, guilty looking tomcat, and the nearest lamp post was at the corner of Drury Lane. But a full, golden moon was in the western heaven, and Hector Wade found Number 356 without trouble, in the middle of a packed, greasy mob of low, sixteenth-century houses that rose sheer from the pavement, with leaded windows protruding like bastions, with wrought-iron scrapers and yawning cellar hatches and overhanging, buttressed angles of walls that in the course of time had become bow-legged and knock-kneed.

A flickering, neurotic gas jet lit up a fly-specked display window. But there were no swords nor daggers of any sort; only a large square of pasteboard which echoed the newspaper advertisement:

"Blades bought. At all times of the day and night. Ring bell at left."

Hector pulled the frayed rope. Came a brushing of feet on a rug inside, and the door of the shop sprang open to disclose a very old, very tall, white-bearded Oriental who peered from beneath bushy brows with shrewd, patient eyes.

"Be pleased to enter, saheb," he said, in halting English and a slurring, foreign accent.

Hector smiled.

India? Asia?

Why! It began here, in the gray heart of London! And so he dropped into gliding Hindustani, the language which his Behari nurse had taught him and which he had never forgotten.

"Apanan duari," he said, the words coming smoothly, evenly, without the trace of an accent, *"kukoro bariyar, ya sheik!"*

Ali Yusuf Khan smiled in return. But he shook his head.

"No, no!" he continued in his halting English. "I am no—ah—Hindu. I speak—Persian."

"So do I!" rejoined Hector in the latter language; and the other, with sudden excitement, took him by the arm and pulled him across the threshold into the shop that lay beneath a fretted Damascan brass lamp in a mass of delicate purple and heliotrope shadows.

"Good, by Allah!" he exclaimed. "I am an old and very stupid camel. I cannot twist my withered tongue around the language of the foreigners."

He waited courteously till Hector had taken a seat.

Then, anxiously:

"You have come to—buy a blade, sword or dagger or yataghan?"

"No. I have come to sell . . ." and, with English directness, pulling the ancient weapon from his pocket, "*this!*"

Ali Yusuf Khan picked up the blade and looked at it. At once a tremor ran through his body. His hand shook as if with palsy. But he controlled himself, went to the corner of the shop, lit another lamp, and examined the dagger minutely.

Finally he turned.

"You—" he asked, staring straight at Hector, "you say you want to sell—this?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

Hector flared up.

"Look here," he said, "if you're trying to insinuate that I came by it through dishonest means . . ."

"No, no." Ali Yusuf Khan was stern, domineering. "Answer me, saheb. Where did you get it?"

"Well—if you must know—it has always been in my family's possession."

"Always?"

"For centuries. My father told me once that one of my ancestors brought it with him from Asia hundreds of years ago."

"You—you know nothing else about this weapon—a legend? Perhaps a tradition?"

"No." Hector was getting impatient. "Look here—I didn't come here to be cross-examined. I saw your advertisement, accepted it in good faith, and . . ."

"*Why* do you want to sell it?" cut in the other.

"Why?" Hector laughed, shortly, disagreeably.

"You're inquisitive, aren't you? But—all right—I'll tell you. I want to sell it because I need money, because I am through with England, with my family, with—oh—everything! Because I want to go to Calcutta, to Asia, on the first ship. Now—tell me—how much money will you give me for it?"

"I shall not buy it!"

"You—you mean to say . . ."

"Wait! But I shall lend you money on it."

"How much?"

And then Ali Yusuf Khan's answer, soft, low:

"As much as you want, saheb. A hundred guineas! A thousand! Ten thousand! It is for you to say!"

CHAPTER VII

Striking a simon-pure romantic note, showing, as it does, or rather tries to do, that a blade can have a soul. Also giving another glimpse of the charming young Oriental princess whom the reader has doubtless forgotten by this time.

YEARS later, when The Honorable Hector Wade spoke of that period of his eventful life, he would add, by way of ruminating, psychological commentary, that the home-spun self-possession in which he considered Ali Yusuf Khan's offer was really the strangest part of the whole incident.

"You musn't forget," he would add, "that I carried a chip on my shoulder and was as quick to smell offense as a mouse smells cheese. The whole sordid, miserable affair was only a few days old, and I hadn't been in London more than seven or eight hours. But you know how it is, how you don't meet people when you want to meet them, and how they seem to pop out of the nowhere when you want to avoid them. There was—what was her name? Oh, yes. Victoria de Bunsen, girl I used to dance with, and, of course, I ran into Vic at Waterloo Station. She was with Jamie Black of the Highland Light Infantry, a sort of second cousin of mine, and both cut me dead, sent me to Coventry, greeted me with an emphatic chorus of unfeigned, contemptuous silence.

"And, on the train up from Sussex, I had seen a copy of *Reynolds' Weekly*. They had stuck my pic-

ture on the front page with a border all round of cards and dice and diaphanously dressed chorus girls and a jolly old headline about 'Younger Son of Earl of Dealle Implicated in Disgraceful Card Scandal.' I fancy you can imagine the rest. So I was rather thin-skinned. *Noli me tangere*—how's that for Latin? Everything touched me on the raw, and I was more afraid of people's pity than of their contempt. You can sidestep contempt by shutting up. But pity . . . Why, it leaves you helpless.

"And then Ali Yusuf Khan's offer. As much money as I wanted, and yet it did *not* seem like charity. It seemed perfectly proper, and sort of on the cards, you see, preordained, Kismet, and all that, that at a moment's notice, at midnight, a few doors from Drury Lane, a mysterious incarnation out of the Arabian Nights whom I had never seen before should offer to lend me an exorbitant sum on a dusty old sword whose blade and hilt was inlaid with a blurred gold pattern. Rum, don't you think?"

"As much as you want, saheb," repeated the old man. "It is for you to say."

Hector was about to suggest fifty pounds, the amount that had dropped from his pocket, when he had a sudden revulsion of feeling. He took the blade from the other's hand.

"No!" he said, steadfastly. "Come what may, I shall not part with this. It would be like parting with . . ." he slurred and stopped; blushed slightly.

"Like parting with a piece of your soul?" the Asian gently suggested.

Hector inclined his head.

"Yes," he said. "It would be like giving up something that I have waited for . . . through the centuries . . ."

He stood there, staring into the fretwork of delicate purple and heliotrope shadows that cloaked the room like a silken veil.

In the corner was a pedestal of ebony and nacre which supported a great Persian incense bowl. Heavy smoke clouds floated and twisted about like a vaporous, gigantic furnace of opal colors wreathing up to the ceiling, with a hot, honey-sweet scent of lilies and lotus buds and sandalwood, and it seemed to Hector as if he were on the borderland of dim, half-forgotten things, on the frontier of a new life—new, yet, somehow, subconsciously remembered—which was remote, not in years nor in distance, but in codified, standardized principles of civilization, from the life, the personal experiences, the very physical and psychical reactions he had known heretofore; as if the ancient blade that was throbbing in his hand were a guidon pointing the way to a Life of To-morrow beside which his Life of Yesterday and To-day faded to a wretched, meaningless dream.

It was like a rush of giant splendor that threatened to overwhelm his mind, his sober, prosy, saving British commonsense and prejudices. . . . And then, out of the trooping shadows where Ali Yusuf Khan had squatted down on a heap of pillows, came the words, in gentle, purring Persian:

"Take the money, saheb, and keep the blade. No, no, no!" as Hector, recalled to earth, was about to

flare up. "You must forget your petty, withering pride. Go where your heart calls you. Follow the feet of your soul . . . out there! to Asia!"

And he rose, crossed the shop, drew up the window blind with an impatient gesture, and pointed to where already the moon was growing fainter and fainter and paling into the drab cosmos of the London morning and where, low in the eastern heaven, between the ragged cleft of Drury Lane, the sun was rising like a ball of somber, crumpled rose-pink.

Then, as if the sordid glimpse of London had broken the spell, he added:

"I am not altogether unselfish. You see, saheb, I am an Asian, and Asia is old and worn and tired. It needs fresh, strong blood. It needs men like yourself. We do not need the sahebs who simply go there to make money and who return to their own country to spend it. We need men who are willing to be one with us—unhappy men to whom their own country denies a chance. Here! Call it a loan!"

He drew a purse filled with sovereigns from the voluminous folds of his waist shawl and gave it to Hector, who weighed it in his palm and laughed, rather disagreeably.

"All right," he said. "I agree to the bargain. But I give you fair warning you'll lose by it. I thought of going to India even before I read your advertisement. But—sober second thoughts . . ." he shrugged his shoulders. "It's really useless, you know. India is only an imperial suburb after all. It's just around the corner from Belgravia and Bond Street and Marlborough House. I—oh—I am mixed up in

a scandal over here, and every scandal that reeks in the London Westend stinks to heaven by the time it reaches Calcutta and some deputy assistant commissioner's mother-in-law's ear—and tongue. I have not the fluttering ghost of a chance in India."

"India is not the only land East of Suez," the other rejoined gently.

"I know. But it is the only part of Asia where I would fit in. I was born there, and my people have lived for generations between the Himalayas and Cape Comorin. I know all sorts of people there, in the army, the civil service, and, of course, they'll give me the cold shoulder as their brethren do in England—not that I can blame them for it. But what's the use? I have half a mind to go West, to Canada, instead of East, and so . . ."

He was about to toss the purse on the low taboret, when Ali Yusuf Khan stopped him with a stiff, wooden gesture and a show of flaming passion.

"I thought you were a gentleman—an English gentleman!"

"I am!" quickly, boyishly.

"Then live up to your bargain. You took the money. Now you must go."

"But don't you understand? I don't want to bore you with the whole, long, mean story of the particular scandal in which I am mixed up. Wouldn't interest you anyway. Only—I tell you I haven't a chance over there."

"You have something else!"

"What?"

"The blade!" Ali Yusuf Khan's words came out

with a tremendous, cold enthusiasm. "The blade!" he repeated, in a hushed, flat voice.

He picked the weapon up and pressed it to his lips.

"The blade will never fail you, saheb," he went on, "though men will and women may. Its soul is old—old and wise and strong and just a little cruel—*and* loyal, for it came out of Asia. The rest . . . man and woman—your friends? What do they matter? For you know the ancient Persian saying: 'Let none confide in the sea, nor in whatever has horns or claws, or who carries deadly weapons; neither in a king, nor in a woman, nor in a priest.' But this blade you can trust!"

"Hm . . . it has played me one dirty trick already," Hector smiled grimly, reminiscently. "It cut through my pocket and lost me my money."

The other, too, smiled.

"Not the blade, saheb, but the sheath. The sheath is old and tired, like Asia, like my own country. And so we will give the sword a new house in which to throb and pulse and weave mighty spells."

For several minutes he rummaged in a carved sandalwood box, finally drawing out a jewel-studded shagreen scabbard into which, slowly, carefully, with his back to his visitor, he fitted the weapon.

"Here, saheb. Never draw the blade in sport, nor in a wrong cause. But trust it. It will speak to you when man fails you—or Fate!"

He said it with a certain note of finality; and Hector muttered clumsy words of thanks and walked out into the gray, haggard London morning.

The great beast of a city was already stirring its

steel-and-concrete limbs with the dull rubbing of tackle and rope and crate, the symphony of more tongues than Babel ever knew of. Trucks and buses rumbled past. Trolley cars shot in all directions, clanking and shrieking. Trumpeting automobiles whirred by with gleaming brasses. An odor rose from the pavement as of sweat and blood and singed shoe leather —the odor of hectic, neurotic, ever hustling Europe—

And, over to the southeast, were the Docks—the wash and heave of the outer sea—India—Asia . . .

Hector hailed the first taxicab.

"To the Peninsular & Oriental Steamship office," he directed.

"A bit early, guv'nor, ain't you? Them city chaps don't open shop until they 'ad their nine o'clock nip of B. & S."

"That's all right." A wave of glorious impatience was surging through Hector's soul. "I shall wait outside the steamship office. At least I'll imagine that I can smell India there."

"Right-oh, guv'nor," said the impassive driver; then, to himself: "Bloomin' rum go, I calls it. Smell —India! What the . . ."

And "bloomin' rum go" were the words which Sergeant Horatio Pinker of the metropolitan police was just then whispering into his martial black mustache as, passing through Coal Yard Street, he saw a light in Ali Yusuf Khan's shop, found the door blinds drawn up, and looked in, as the city regulations and his private curiosity prescribed.

"I don't think the old josser's exactly a crook," he reported to Police Captain Hodges half an hour later. "But—my word! He fair gave me the creeps. Standing there with his arms above his head like—like—oh—one of them red plush monkeys on a stick we used to play with when we was kids—and his whole body swinging to and fro—and the expression on his face! Looking straight at me he was, but never saw me, no, sir! Looked through me, that's what he did. And then—well"— Sergeant Pinker coughed, and continued a little diffidently, like a man who knows that his word is going to be doubted—"he goes somewhere in the back of his shop, and I hears a snick and a twirl as if he was opening a safe, and back he comes and round his scrawny old neck he wears a necklace with about fifty diamonds each as big as my thumb-nail . . . and I knows twinklers! I knows when they're glass and when they ain't. I used to walk the Bond Street beat, sir, and I tell you them pieces of ice is worth a cool hundred thousand pound sterling and . . . No, sir!" indignantly, "I signed the Good Templar's pledge over three years back. *No!* I had nothing all morning except a cup of that hog wash Harry Snooks sells over at his stand near Drury Lane and calls it coffee—blast his eyes! Well—to go back to that Oriental josser—a jolly rum go, that's what it is . . ."

"Well, sergeant, keep an eye on him."

"Yes, sir."

And that night, sipping his stone ginger at his favorite tavern, the *Running Footman* near Berkeley Square, he spoke about it to his friend Jimmy Haw-

den, reporter—though he was still youthful and unsophisticated enough to call himself special writer—of the *Daily Chronicle* who in turn, dropping in at *Dolly's Chop House* for a bite, an hour later, mentioned it to a sandy-haired gentleman—who whistled and snapped his fingers.

Meanwhile, had Sergeant Horatio Pinker transplanted his astral body via the Magic Carpet route a matter of a few thousand miles east and looked, like the Devil in Madrid, through the bulbous, painted dome of the palace at Tamerlanistan, he would have seen the Princess Aziza Nurmahal facing a clamorous, mutinous, sneering mob of courtiers and soldiers and palace officials grouped, respectively, about the black-robed, fur-capped figure of Gulabian, the Armenian treasurer, and Tagi Khan, Master of Horse, resplendent in peach-colored trousers, loose, crimson, silver-embroidered coat, and voluminous turban of cloth-of-gold, with Koom Khan, the commander-in-chief, playing the rôle of sardonic, mischief-making middleman. From group to group he shifted, with soft words and soft gestures, and he left behind him a spluttering, minatory trail of discontent.

The princess was pale, frightened, nervous. A sob rose to her lips, and the governor of the eastern marches pointed a rude, derisive thumb.

"A well is not to be filled with dewdrops," he said in a stage whisper, "nor is a turbulent land to be ruled by a woman's tears."

"As soon drag for the moon reflected in the water,"

chimed in his twin brother, governor of the western marches, stroking his scarlet beard.

"As soon lift a hand to catch Time," Koom Khan suggested, unsmilingly.

And then laughter, while the princess turned appealingly to Ayesha Zemzem, the shriveled old nurse, whom she had raised to the rank of *Zil-i-Sultana,* "Shadow of the Queen."

"Ayesha," she said, rising, "I am sick of all this leaky-tongued clacking and twaddling and babbling. Thou art regent. Do thou tell them that, in this as in all other matters, I have decided to follow in the foot-steps of my dead father until Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh,* returns from the far places."

"Thou art wrong, piece of my soul," the hill woman rejoined bluntly.

"Wrong? Thou sayest that . . . even thou?"

Resolutely, Ayesha inclined her head.

"I love thee, little soul," she said. "I would make my heart a floor cloth for thy white feet. But—I have thought over the matter since last we had speech with that dog of a Babu, and to-day I tell thee that thou art wrong."

"Ayesha!" exclaimed the princess, the hot tears welling again in her eyes.

"Wrong and unwise!" stolidly repeated the other, amidst an excited chorus of assent. "Tamerlanistan is poor—and money is money."

"Right!" agreed Gulabian, surprised as well as pleased that here was a new, and powerful, adherent of the cause of foreign "concessions." "Money is indeed money!"

"Money is on the lips of the liar," cried Aziza Nurmahal, while the Sheik-ul-Islam murmured piously, clicking the wooden beads of his rosary, that money is an infidel sect and the pavement on the bitter, jagged road to damnation.

"Money is a most evil stench in the nostrils of mankind," he added, with a Moslem's unblushing hypocrisy, "but it is sweet ambergris when handled by a wise and good priest, familiar with the lessons of the Koran." He coughed, rather self-consciously, as he caught Koom Khan's stony eye.

The princess leaned forward. Her left hand clutched the scepter of the Gengizkhani, while her right was about the hilt of the straight, simple sword that had rested across the knees of the dead Ameer during the funeral procession, and the soul of the naked steel seemed to reach out and touch her own soul, to sluice it with an ancient and crunching energy.

"Right or wrong," she said, "I have decided. I do not want to grant 'concessions.' I do not want the money of the foreigners without the advice of the *Itizad el-Dowleh.* It is wicked money—money that fills our ears with the raucous clamor of strife . . ."

"Speaking about ears," sententiously from the Armenian, "it has been said that a hungry belly has no ears."

"Right," said the governor of the eastern marches; "without money, I am a rogue; with money, I am God."

"Thou art always a rogue—with money, or without," gently opined his twin brother.

"And thou hast pig's ears," came the civil rejoinder, while Koom Khan, to keep the assembly from degenerating into an unseemly brawl and perhaps the swishing of swords, rose, gathered eyes like a hostess, and walked straight up to the peacock throne.

"Aziza Nurmahal," he said, with drawling, slow arrogance, "statecraft waits on facts, a mere handmaiden, and does not invent them; and the fact is that we, the princes and nobles and soldiers of Tamerlanistan, have decided in full *durbar* that our land needs the money and wisdom and energy of the sahebs. The Babu Bansi has made a fair offer . . ."

"Indeed!" cried the Armenian to whom, that very morning, Bansi, who had returned from Teheran, had given a certified check on the Anglo-Persian Bank for a goodly number of rupees, signed "Preserved Higgins"; while Tagi Khan, the leader of the other faction, boomed out that the Babu Chandra's offer was every bit as fair.

Koom Khan shrugged his massive shoulders.

"It makes no difference to me," he went on, "to which of the two Babus thou grantest the concession . . ."

"Right!" chimed in the nurse who, though opposed to the princess' steadfast refusal of opening the land to European exploitation, had nowise lost her dislike for the courtiers nor learned to bridle her tongue. "Right, by Allah! Either Babu will well grease thy thieving hand."

"Peace, O noseless one!" from Koom Khan; then, to the princess: "It seems that thy path is clear. For we have decided."

"We?" echoed Aziza Nurmahal.

She flared up. Her nostrils quivered. A light like a slow-eddying flame came into her black eyes.

A woman she was, young, tender, unable to cope with the tortuous, shifting undercurrents of palace and bazaar and mosque; not yet weaned from the silken, scented harem peace; alone. But in her veins raced the stormy, conquering blood of the Gengizkhani, the descendants of that Genghiz Khan who, the son of a rough Central Asian shepherd, clouted an empire together with brain and brawn; and, abruptly, her flaming pride of race burnt away the soft dross of her youth.

"I am the ruler of this land," she said, in a voice as dry and keen as a new-ground sword. "My word is law. My gesture is a code. My whim is a decree. No decision shall be made about the matter of the concessions until the return of the *Itizad el-Dowleh.* Such is my command."

"Thy—command?" Koom Khan guffawed. "And how then wilt thou enforce thy—command?"

"Thus!" cried Aziza Nurmahal.

And, with utter, dramatic suddenness, she jerked out the ancient, straight sword, and brought it down on the wrist of the commander-in-chief.

"Allah! Allah!" Koom Khan screamed in pain.

Blood squirted like a thick, crimson whip. He fell, fainting, to the ground.

Came silence; silence that bloated like a balloon of evil anticipations, while the crowd rose, like one man, shifted forward, intense, venomous, holding its breath like a beast of prey about to pounce and tear . . .

and while something like a tremendous lassitude swept over Aziza.

She stared at them.

Knowing the Orient by right of birth and race, she realized that her psychological moment had arrived.

Now or never! Mastery or death! There lay her choice, her chance.

So she jerked her wandering, trembling mind back into the control of her senses. She held herself erect and motionless except for her right arm which grasped the dripping blade.

"I am the ruler of this land," she said again; and there was in her soft, low voice an enormous, metallic resonance, the ring of utter conviction.

"Thus shall I enforce my commands—thus—and thus—and thus!"

And, tightly pressing her lips together, her heart writhing in revolt at her own unwomanly brutality, she stepped down from the peacock throne and dealt blow after blow with her sword, right, left, indiscriminately, pricking, slashing, cutting, wounding . . .

And the reaction on the mob was instantaneous, and typical.

For these men were Asians; men inherently callous; men devoid of that weakening outgrowth of the imagination which the Occident calls sympathy; men in whom ruthlessness and cruelty excite a certain kind of admiration as a conspicuous and unmistakable exhibition of energy.

"By the red pig's bristles!" cried the governor of the eastern marches, as he tied a handkerchief about

his bleeding left arm. "A true daughter of the dead Ameer!"

"Brood of the spotted tiger's brood!"

"A real Gengizkhani, by Allah and by Allah!"

"Her father was the sickle, and she is the hoe!"

"Admirable!"

The last from the Sheik-ul-Islam who was rubbing an ear that the sword had nicked, and Gulabian, who had hid behind Tagi Khan's broad back, stepped forward and kowtowed low; the others followed suit, and again Aziza Nurmahal seized the psychological moment.

"We understand each other—now!" she said, and a smile ran from lip to lip, a smile of admiration, this time, of affection even. "There will be no granting of concessions until the return of Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh*. Nor will there be discussing, nor criticizing, nor wondering, nor speculating. Is that understood?"

"Listen is obey, O sultana!" came the groveling chorus.

"Good!"

She turned to the nurse.

"Since thou dost not agree with me in the matter of the concessions, and since thou art too old to be beaten and since I love thee too dearly to give thee the point of the sword when it is red, I shall send thee back to the harem, where thou belongest. Thou art no longer regent—no longer the Shadow of the Queen. But thou shalt live out thy life in the shadow of the queen's affection."

By this time, Gulabian, the Armenian, had regained the insolent, wheedling resiliency of his race.

"If thou shouldst need another regent in place of Ayesha Zemzem," he suggested, "then I . . ."

"I have already thought of that," replied the princess. "Step forth, Wahab al-Shaitan!"

And a shiver of apprehension ran through the crowd, while from a far corner of the hall where he had stood a motionless onlooker, dressed in motley black and scarlet, his immense hands crossed on the hilt of his beheading ax, the executioner, a gigantic, plum-colored negro, stalked forward with a sinister majesty of movement.

"Wahab al-Shaitan," continued the princess, "thou art regent until further orders. *Rawan-i-Sultana,* 'Killer for the Queen,' shall be thy honorable title. Thy motto shall be: 'Do not trust the living; do not fear the dead.' And thy ax shall be thy staff and seal of office."

Then, abruptly:

"The audience is ended, nobles and gentles."

An immediate consequence of Aziza Nurmahal's sudden assertion was that the Babu Chandra, local manager of the Anglo-Asian Cable Company, decided suddenly that his head would be more safely on his shoulders if he delivered the cablegram which, addressed to the princess, had arrived that morning from London and which, at first, he had felt inclined to suppress—not because he understood the cryptic wording, but for the sake of general principles.

It was dated from London, bore no signature, and said:

"The blade is on its way to Calcutta. Go there, and wait in the house of my younger brother."

The princess was alone in a tower room of the palace when she opened the message and read it.

"The ancient prophecy!" she murmured. "The ancient prophecy of the Gengizkhani!"

And as she stepped to the window and looked south toward India, where, under the sweep of the twilight, the bunched mass of the town reddened to russet, then chilled to flat, silvery gray, while, in the office of the Anglo-Asian Cable Company, at the corner of the Nahassim Street, Chandra's busy brown fingers were clicking a message to a gentleman from New York, temporarily at the Savoy, London.

"Wahab al-Shaitan," said Aziza Nurmahal to the regent-executioner, "as soon as my preparations are made, I shall go south, to Calcutta. Rule thou the land in my absence, and—if thou shouldst not know what to do—consult thy beheading ax. And the rest shall be as Allah willeth!"

"My dear," said Mr. Ezra W. Warburton to his daughter, "I have to go to Calcutta, and thence up into Central Asia on business. Would you like to come with me?"

"You just bet, you dear old dad!"

And she gave him a hug and a large, moist kiss.

CHAPTER VIII

Giving the pink and silver dawn of a new life, not to forget a baker's dozen of stormclouds.

Mr. Ezra W. Warburton accomplished things less by keeping abreast of opportunity in the matter of enterprise, by a cunning and algebraic reckoning and dovetailing of the slightest details and chances as was the business secret of his rival, Mr. Preserved Higgins, than by an innate, sudden perceptiveness that was almost genius—would have been classified as genius had he been an artist instead of a financier.

Thus, just as soon as he had read Chandra's cablegram, which quoted the one Aziza Nurmahal had received from London *in toto* and added the distressing information that the princess had finally had her way, that there was going to be no more talk of "concessions" until her father's prime minister, who had gone on a mysterious errand, had returned, he had decided to proceed to Tamerlanistan forthwith.

He had no idea what he should do after he got there. Too, he knew from former experiences that Mr. Preserved Higgins, in spite of his extravagant and blasphemous verbosity, was not given to bluffing, to empty boasting, when it came to business; and there was the wire which the Londoner had sent him to his New York office and which had been cabled on to the Savoy:

"Got you licked to a frazzle. What price Tamerlanistan now?"

Mr. Warburton told himself that, in the tug-of-war about the Tamerlanistan "concessions," he had lost out on two counts: the princess' decision and his rival's shrewdness, and—he added in his thoughts—perhaps the former was only a cloak for the latter; perhaps Aziza Nurmahal and the Cockney were working hand-in-hand.

And it was then that his congenital pettiness came into the focus. He would fight Mr. Preserved Higgins to the last trench. Doubtless, his own chance to make enormous investments in Tamerlanistan and to reap correspondingly large profits was gone. But at least he might be able to make success, if not impossible, then harder for the other, and there, in Mr. Warburton's philosophy of life and business—interchangeable terms—was a point gained. Too, it was in this that he differed fundamentally from the real builder, the real pioneer, who works and constructs and massively clouts together for the glory, the zest, the bully splendor of the thing, and not for his personal, despicable glory and profit.

He was like a small boy who has eaten his fill, and who, rather than push his plate across the table to his younger brother, decides to finish his ice cream to the last, painful spoonful.

Yes. At least he would be on the spot ready to watch his chance for mischief; and so he had made sure at once, over the telephone, that Mr. Preserved

Higgins had not booked on the P. & O. liner *Kashmere* which left for Calcutta the following morning, and that there would be no other sailing for the next ten days.

His decision to ask his daughter to come with him had also been made on the spur of the moment.

His wife had died when Jane was a young child, and father and daughter had always been very close. He was very proud of her. He admired her clean, audacious self-reliance, but, too, parentlike, was a little afraid of it.

Thus when Hector, following Mr. Preserved Higgins' exposure, had left the room, and when Jane had turned to him with a flat "I don't believe it. The man is innocent!" his heart had given a bound, for he knew from former experiences her sweeping, uncompromising fashion of taking the part of the underdog. Heretofore, the occasion had usually been with some underfed slum child or some underpaid servant, and had been easily and satisfactorily settled with the help of check book and fountain pen. But this time it was a man, a good-looking and youthful male with romantic eyes, who had flashed a romantic Oriental blade.

"Damn!" Mr. Warburton had said to himself.

Then, in a loud voice, and with an entirely false note of cheerful off-handedness:

"Ridiculous, my dear. The young fellow owned up to it himself."

"And yet I know he's innocent, dad!"

"*How* do you know, Jane?"

"Because!"

"A woman's reason, my dear."

"And the very, very bestest reason in the world. I just—*know* it!"

"But . . ." an ejaculation, typically, malely irascible.

"But—nothing, dad! Nobody with eyes like his can possibly be guilty of such a mean thing as cheating at cards. And then—remember how he used his blade, dad!" she had added with serene, unblushing inconsequence.

He had begun to think of speeches, very firm, explicit, and didactic speeches, he would make, pointing out to her that London, all Europe in fact, was full of fortune hunters, that he was an immensely wealthy man and she a famous heiress, that perhaps Hector Wade had staged the fight near St. Katherine so as to meet her in a picturesque setting.

But, knowing her stubbornness, her sense of absolute independence, he had thought that it would be better to let well enough alone, and had satisfied himself with a grumbled "I had an idea that, with all your social experiences, here and in New York and in Paris, you'd have more sense than to fall for that sort of . . . " he had come near saying "bunk," but had recovered in time and had said "thing!"

The choice of words had been unfortunate.

Jane had made a rash reply, and by the end of the scene—for it had degenerated into a scene—for the first time in their lives they had felt conscious of a certain antagonism toward each other. It had been as sudden as it had been unexpected.

And it had hurt—both.

Then had come Babu Chandra's telegram; and—"distance and a change of milieu is the best palliative in the world," had been his paternally cynical thought. In the golden romance of far Asia she would forget the romance her girlish heart had woven about "that card-cheating adventurer," as he called him.

Therefore his invitation to come along with him.

Therefore, too, her warm, moist kiss.

Therefore, finally, Jane smiling impishly at a large bouquet of silvery Guelder roses that had come, that very morning, accompanied by a note which was typically English, both in its shy, clumsy self-consciousness and its unexpected, direct outspokenness, saying amongst other things:

". . . and so I hope you'll accept these roses. I know I have not the right to be fond of you, but I can't very well help it, can I? No harm done, anyway. For, you see, I am off to India to-morrow morning, and the odds are rather long that I shall never see you again."

The signature was:

"Yours very truly, (Sic!)

"Hector Wade."

Thus, Mr. Ezra W. Warburton was doubly shocked, when, having nursed his *mal de mer* in his cabin during the first few days of the journey, as was his habit, just as the *Kashmere* was sticking her dainty nose into the green swirl of the Bay of Biscay, and after he had decided that the world was not so bad when all was said and done and that he would be able to do with a cup of beef broth, a dry biscuit, and a glass

of port, passing by a large Anglo-Indian lady with spats, an abortive mustache, big feet, and a tailor-made manner, he heard her say to her companion:

"Such a jolly little girl that—what's her name?—oh, yes!—Warburton. And, would you believe it, my dear, she pals up with that bounder of a Wade!"

"You mean that Dragoon chap who . . ."

"Yes, my dear."

"Good Heavens! You know, they shouldn't allow chaps like Wade to go to India. Wretched for the morale of the natives. But, with the Liberals in power, what can you . . ."

The financier did not wait to hear the end of the sentence. He forgot all about broth and biscuit and port.

"Have you by any chance seen my daughter?" he asked the steward in a positively dramatic manner.

"Yes, sir. I saw her on top deck two minutes back. Thank you, sir."

And it was in the snug shadow of a life-boat that the irate father came upon his daughter, side by side with Hector Wade.

"Good—morning!" he said, with a strong accent on the "good" and a smile curling his thin lips.

But his daughter knew of old that this altogether too consummate endeavor after genial ease was nothing except a cloak for a smoldering rage that might break at any moment.

It was she herself, therefore, who fired the first shot.

"Dad," she said, "it's no use your saying anything to Hector!"

"Hector?"

"Yes, dad"—a tiny finger indicating her companion who was trying to speak but was prevented from doing so by the firm grinding of Jane's right heel into his left instep—"I mean Mr. Wade. You know him, don't you? I know what you're thinking, dad, and I tell you it's no use blaming him. I *made* him talk to me. I *made* him sit by me. Didn't I, Hector?"

"Daughter!" said Mr. Warburton, in a decidedly episcopal manner, "come with me at once."

"I'm too old to be spanked, dad," smiled Jane, "but I'll come with you, and . . ."

"As to you, sir," her father had turned to Hector, "you—you are a rascal! An adventurer! You—you . . . to follow my daughter—to take the same ship—to . . ."

"When did you book your passage, Mr. Warburton?" came the younger man's cool question.

"Saturday afternoon! Why?"

"Because I booked mine Saturday morning. If you do not believe me, ask the purser. Good day, sir!"

And he bowed to Jane and turned on his heel, while the girl looked at her father rather triumphantly.

The next moment she had slipped her hand through his arm and was walking by his side.

"Dad," she said, "don't be angry. I just wanted to find out something from Hector, and I did. And I am so glad you are better. Oh—come on! Stop biting your lips!"

Late that night—for, after all, there was real affection between them—Jane confided in her father.

"Dad," she said, "I do believe he is innocent. He wouldn't say so—though goodness knows I tried to make him 'fess up!"

For the first time her father smiled.

"I know what a persistent little baggage you are, and I feel it in my heart to be sorry for young Wade if *you* nagged him."

"I didn't. I just asked him."

"All right. I understand. I am quite familiar with your way of—asking. Well—what was the result?"

"I—oh—I don't know. 'Are you really guilty?' I asked him, and he said: 'Yes.' And then I repeated my question once—perhaps twice . . ."

"Call it seventeen times," dryly from her father.

"And, finally, in a sort of desperation . . ."

"Which I personally can well appreciate—"

"He said: 'If you do not believe me, ask my father and my older brother.' Now, isn't that queer?"

"What's queer about it?"

"Why—if I asked his own father, his own brother, they would naturally defend him; wouldn't they? They'd swear up and down that he's innocent—of course! So why does he want me to ask *them?*"

"Something to that," grumbled Mr. Warburton; and, suddenly, she put her arms about his neck.

"You and I are pals, aren't we, dad?"

"You bet, little daughter."

"You wouldn't want me to hide anything from you, would you?"

"Sure not."

"Well—I am fond of Hector! Very, very fond!"

He flared up.

"Do you mean to say," he demanded, in a voice choked with rage, "that that young scoundrel has dared . . ."

"He?" She shook her head. "Gracious no! He isn't that sort! It was up to me to make the advances . . ."

"Jane!"

"It's all right, dad. He wouldn't let me. But I *am* fond of him, and I *do* believe he is innocent, and . . . oh, dear . . ."

And then her father took her on his knees as he used to do when she was a small girl and had broken her pet doll, and talked to her at length and very gently. For, while he believed devoutly in a holy trinity composed of money, respectability, and pedigree, he also believed in fairness: fairness hedged in by certain safety-first, protective, social conventions.

"If Mr. Wade is innocent," he wound up, "let him prove it. And then—well—we'll talk about it again. But promise me that you will keep away from him as long as he is under a cloud—right or wrong—innocent or guilty. Our social prejudices may be wretched and mean and narrow, but—there they are! We simply have to live up to them this side of Utopia."

"That's exactly what Hector says," she replied through her tears. "He told me that he has no right to speak to me—that . . ."

And then her father mumbled something about Hector Wade, after all, not being such a bad fellow, and thought to himself that he would strengthen the younger man's resolution to keep away from Jane by a few, kindly, but decisive words.

But there was no need for it. Somehow, the ship seemed to have swallowed Hector. He took his meals in his cabin and only went for a breath of fresh air late at night, nor was it altogether because of the girl that he kept to himself so rigorously. For, knowing his own class and the emphatic, pitiless judgments of his own class when it came to things that "simply aren't done," he could well imagine what was being said about him in the smoking saloon by the home-English and Anglo-Indians and Anglo-Chinese, all belonging to that social stratum, as hide-bound as the most superstitious Brahmin caste, that puts the niceties of manners and customs far above the niceties of their Christian religion, which preaches forgiveness and plain, straight humanity, and prefers a crimson-handed murderer to a cad.

He had cheated at cards, society said; he had broken an unwritten law; and down there, in the first-class smoking saloon, it was held that a man could put his foot on the decalogue as long as he "played the game."

And a jolly good rule too, thought Hector, without the slightest trace of bitterness against his countrymen; for, after all, this unwritten rule had made Britain what she was, fully as much as Magna Charta.

He did not even fell unhappy or depressed when, in his lonely wanderings late at night about the deserted top deck, he heard Jane Warburton's low laugh drift up from the music room.

Hopeless, his love for her? Of course.

Utterly hopeless, and he knew it.

But he stared at the revelation of his love like a new Adam, and he was certain that the original Gar-

den of Eden lay behind her deep, gold-reflecting eyes.

Light, frothy love had come to him in the past. Had come and gone.

But now, for the first time, love that was not light had come into his life, and the burden of it was both heavy and sweet.

And all the time, while he was calling himself a silly fool who was trying to rope the far stars with a clumsy, leathern noose of his own clouting; while he cursed himself for a sentimental jackass who ought to be kicked; a wild thing in him, a thing that his past life seemed to have beggared and starved and denied, woke in its full, fresh strength.

Calling to him like some flying spirit in a storm, it claimed him. It seemed to summon him back to something he had forgotten long ago—centuries ago. It drew him as empty space draws a giddy man, to the very edge of the precipice. Steadily it gained in strength and massiveness until it had enveloped him completely in a silent, receptive atmosphere which he could not shake off, waking or sleeping; and, at the very core of it, at the flaming center of his love, strong yet soft, steely yet pliable, brutal yet loyal, was the sword—the ancient blade which had come out of Asia!

It gave meaning to his life and, somehow, a faint, silvery promise to his love—

His thoughts roamed back frequently to the little shop in Coal Yard Street, off Drury Lane, and to the strange, elderly Asiatic who, more even than his own impulse, had been responsible for his sudden, aim-

less, fantastic departure for Calcutta—and what lay beyond.

Resolutely, deliberately, being a sober-minded young Englishman, he tried to forget, to deny even to himself, the mysterious veil which cloaked the whole incident, from the advertisement in the newspaper to Ali Yusuf Khan's parting advice that the blade would speak to him when man failed him, or Fate. He preferred to picture Ali as a kindly old man who had taken pity on his unhappiness and had helped him out of the generosity of his heart without any ulterior motive; and so, twenty-four hours before the *Kashmere* reached Calcutta, he asked the cabin steward to bring pen and ink and paper, and wrote a letter to his impromptu benefactor, winding up with:

". . . and so, while I don't know what the future may have in store for me, I shall always be very grateful to you, to you and—well, yes—to Asia. You must let me know if I can ever be of help to you . . ."

And, just then, Ali Yusuf Khan needed help.

For a day after Police Sergeant Horatio Pinker had told the story of the old Oriental's string of diamonds to reporter Jimmy Hawden who, in turn, had mentioned it to a sandy-haired gentleman, the latter had faced Mr. Preserved Higgins in the dingy, cobwebby office on Upper Thames Street, not far from Poultney's Inn.

He had told his tale, and the Cockney millionaire had mused and shaken his head.

"I 'ave 'arf an idea who the blighter is," he had said, finally, "but I don't know wot 'e's doin' 'ere. Well—

alwys be on the syfe side, as the fat boy sed as 'e swalloed 'is tenth mutton pie. Yes—I think 'e'll be syfer in jug, syfer for me, that is!"

And he had gone to the police, had given a description of a necklace of diamonds of which he had been robbed, had sworn to a search warrant by the strength of which a very similar string of diamonds—"as like to mine as peas in a pod," he had said—had been found in Ali Yusuf Khan's small safe. And, by this entirely crude, but entirely efficient method, the latter was told twenty-four hours later by Police Captain Hodges that everything he might say would be used against him, while Sergeant Horatio Pinker banked a neat check which Mr. Preserved Higgins had given him and dreamt of promotion.

Ali Yusuf Khan had taken his imprisonment with a great deal of blandly philosophic calm and had driven Mr. Robertson, the young lawyer whom the court had assigned to him, nearly to distraction by absolutely refusing to say where and how he had got the necklace, and by simply smiling into his partriarchal beard when confronted with the fair enough statement that a man in his position had no business having such valuable jewels in his possession.

"Yes," he had said, in his soft, halting English, "the diamonds—they are mine—yes, saheb. Yes. I can prove it."

"Then why don't you? Why do you let it come to trial?"

"Because . . ." Ali Yusuf Khan had interrupted himself. "Tell me, saheb. Mr. Higgins—he must come—I mean be present at my trial?"

"Yes. At least I can arrange it so."

"Good. And perhaps you can arrange too that the trial—it will not be for many, many weeks?".

"Well—I may be able to hold it over until the September assizes. But why, man? Heavens above, do you prefer to stay in jail?"

"Yes, saheb, if that should keep Mr. Higgins in town."

"But—why, man? What's going on in the back of your twisting Oriental brain?"

And Ali Yusuf Khan had smiled guilelessly and had refused to answer any further questions.

Meanwhile, the *Kashmere* came in sight of Calcutta, and all the world was on deck, exchanging cards and promises to write, which would not be kept, and beginning to reëstablish the strict social lines of Anglo-India which divide a deputy assistant commissioner's wife from the wife of a penniless subaltern of native infantry, lines which had been partly forgotten in the humanizing influence of an ocean steamship.

Utterly alone in the throng, with the very stewards knowing and whispering of his disgrace, Hector Wade leaned over the top deck gunwale, looking out to where the sun was rising in the distant east behind lowering cloud banks that were like mountains of gold, glowing lava. There was a gauze-like fog which lifted suddenly, and, minute by minute, Job Charnock's old town came more sharply into the focus. Nearer and nearer it came until he could see the details.

The roofs of the city were bathed in a purple light.

The windows flashed with a thousand dazzling reflections. The whole was Calcutta on a perfect day in late summer; a city of brass and.copper and gold, hard, shimmering, like the legendary town the Titans once forged out of the molten fragments of a forgotten world.

So the *Kashmere* steamed up that chained, or rather unchained, monster named the Hoogli, which every once in a while rises kittenishly, gnawing at the water front with sharp teeth, and strewing the surrounding landscape with the torn, battered carcasses of great ships.

Asia! thought Hector. The land which had given him birth! The land which he had forgotten in the soft, yellow Sussex wold! And he seemed to recognize it after the manner of scenes seen in vivid dreams. Like a treasure house it was to him, which he could not enter without the right password, and somehow he knew that he would remember the password—that the ancient blade, which throbbed against his heart, would whisper it to him.

He was curiously excited as he stood there, amidst the chattering, gossiping, laughing crowd of Anglo-Indians, picking out familiar landmarks. Yet his excitement was neither vicious nor violent, but like a delicate network of feelers connecting him with the great, motley Asia which lay there at his feet—"waiting for me, expecting me," the words came to him unconsciously.

And he stood there and stared and thought, while the *Kashmere,* obeying the touch of the master pilot, zigzagged her way through the shifting sand banks

of the great, man-eating river, and while beyond the arrogant town the highlands came into view, closing in like a tide of stone—as if Asia were there, behind those naked, sun-scorched ridges that glowed like topaz and sapphire—Asia, passive, patient, amorphous, yet minatory—threatening, even in its sleep, the handful of Europeans who were clinging to its outer fringe . . .

As Hector looked, something hidden seemed to grow within him to a height of abnormal perceptiveness. The sense of a past life, a life which he was dimly remembering again, became magnified with every minute that passed. He felt that presently the power of *perceiving* would pass into that of *doing*. He would strike a blow for his fate . . . a blow . . . his hand touched the sword that pressed against his heart . . .

Then, very suddenly, a dry cackle jerked him back into the realities of his life.

"Yes," somebody was saying, "they kicked him out of the Dragoons. Cheated at cards, the damned cad. What's he going to do in India? Heaven knows. The usual thing, I s'pose—go under—mate up with some low-caste bazaar woman—live native style—come 'round the Club, cadgin' for drinks . . . *you* know, Jack! Calcutta's full of his sort . . ."

CHAPTER IX

Which mentions some trivialities about Gwendolyn de Vere, née Bridget O'Callahan, then swings straight back to a section of Calcutta as famous for its evil odors as its evil morals.

Even Tollemache Wade, though he regarded any show in which Miss Gwendolyn de Vere, née Bridget O'Callahan, had a part through the roseate spectacles of his personal affection for her, could not deny that "A Pair of Gray Eyes" was not a new musical play.

For, in a way, it was a historic play, a gently reminiscent play that had been cut out, pasted, remodeled, and recast; had been restored to its original form, renamed, and once again rewritten; finally had been rehashed with the help of a collaborator who was an impecunious cousin of the producing manager, and who took seventy-five per cent of the royalties and put it through all the regular paces of condensement and enlargement which make playwriting such a delightful pastime for a nervous writer blessed with an artistic temperament, a conscience, and a lack of humor.

The music contained stray bits from Gilbert and Sullivan's operas and a good many Wagnerian *motifs* made over and syncopated, while the dialogue was richly spiced with lines from "Charlie's Aunt." There was, of course, an opening chorus showing a London society matron whose daughters—seventeen of them,

including Gwendolyn de Vere—hopped about in bathing suits; interpolated specialties giving imitations of famous imitators; a whole-hearted Irish self-made man, who had founded the Bermuda Onion Trust and whose daughter was being wooed by a Russian Grand-duke who spoke with a Franco-Hebrew accent; and wheezes, the repetition of which would be considered suicidal on any sunny Broadway corner between Thirty-Fourth and Forty-Seventh Streets.

Even the tuning of the bass-viol was stolen.

But the play was a success.

"Yes, old dear," said Gwendolyn de Vere to The Honorable Tollemache Wade, reclining on a couch in her bedroom of the Adelphi Apartments, which was typical of her mind and taste—a hectic rubbish and flummery of make-believe art. "They're turning them away night after night."

"Corkin', what?"

"Corkin'—rather! But not for me! I haven't even a speakin' bit. And the show has positively *made* Nell Grosvenor. You know yourself she can't dance, and she can't sing, and—her figure—my word! But there you are, Tollie old chap. She is—*made!* Why—up at Robinson & Smyth's they named a new brassiere after her!"

"Yes?"

Tollemache Wade looked up, a little worried. He was the sort who, never looking ahead of the passing hour when it was a question of staying his own cravings, had not the heart to look beyond the passing hour's pity where those whom he loved were concerned

—the sort who pauperized others as well as himself. And he had an idea of what was coming.

"Nell Grosvenor is going to marry that stockbrokin' johnny next week," went on Gwendolyn; "what's his name?—oh, yes—Madison, and she's goin' to quit the stage straight off."

"Who's going to substitute for her?" asked Tollemache; and then the answer which he expected—and feared:

"I am—if you'll come through with a bit of the ready. You know how it is in the profession. A girl hasn't got a chance unless she slips something to the manager—and . . ."

"But, my dear!" expostulated Tollemache. "I haven't a red, you know, and I'm head-over-heels in debts, and . . ."

"If you can't, Reggie Bullivant will!" came Gwendolyn's terse, brutal rejoinder.

The result was that Tollemache Wade paid another and humiliating call on Sam Lewis, the usurer of Lombard Street, and, by signing a note for fifteen thousand guineas, received five thousand in cash and the remaining ten thousand in champagne and unsalable rugs; that Gwendolyn de Vere appeared the next week in Nell Grosvenor's rôle, coming on in the first act as an English milkmaid, a posy of property daisies in her hand, dressed in a simple little milking-costume of rose madder charmeuse and a diamond tiara; and that, early in September, Mr. Sam Lewis went to Sussex and interviewed the Earl of Dealle.

He came prepared for the usual scene: hard words,

a curt refusal to settle his son's debts, then, after certain threats on the part of Mr. Lewis, a check book drawn out and the pen scratching tremblingly across the pink slip, perhaps with an accompanying "I say. Don't deposit this check for a couple of weeks. I have to have time to turn round and make certain arrangements"—a euphemism for mortgaging or selling another piece of property.

But, for once, Mr. Lewis had made a mistake.

He stated what he wanted, and the earl, hiding the wound in his heart, looked up very much with the expression of the Punch and Judy clown just before he frizzles the policeman with a red-hot poker.

"Sam," he said, for he had had dealings of his own with the money lender when both had been forty years younger, "you backed the wrong mare this time. Long odds—what, what?—but no starter at all! In other words, you lose, my lad."

"Lose—what?"

"Fifteen thousand guineas, Samuel. That's the amount, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes—also some other notes long overdue—altogether nearly twenty-five thousand . . ."

"A whole lot of tin," came the sardonic rejoinder, "but you should thank the God of Abraham and Jacob that you can afford to lose it."

"But—m'lord!" Mr. Lewis shivered. He wiped beads of perspiration from his bulbous forehead with a large bandana handkerchief. "You mean to say that . . ."

"I mean to say that I have resigned being chancellor of the exchequer for Tollemache."

"But . . ."

"Sorry, my lad. The simple truth is that I have not got it—that you can't wring money from a stone—who is stony broke . . ." He smiled grimly at his own pun.

Mr. Lewis changed from the wheedling to the minatory.

"M'lord," he said, "if you don't pay . . ."

"Right-oh! I know exactly what you are going to do. Have to have your little old pound of flesh, what? And since you can't get it in coin of the realm, you'll take it out in ruin and disgrace—by dragging my son through the court of bankruptcy and through the filth of the ha'penny press. Very well. Hector ruined because of Tollemache"—he mumbled to himself; his sardonic bravado was gone; he was just an old man, feeble, pitiful, senile—"and now Tollemache! Divine Providence and all that sort of asinine drivel . . ."

He collapsed into a chair and cried, as old men cry, with cracked, ludicrous, high-pitched little sobs, while Tomps, the butler, showed Mr. Sam Lewis to the door.

And one of the results of the interview was that Mr. Preserved Higgins, who was pacing up and down the length of the little cobwebby office of Upper Thames Street, happening to glance at the headline of the afternoon newspaper which the sandy-haired gentleman had brought in, stopped suddenly short and uttered the word "Cricky!"

After which he laughed uproariously.

A minute earlier he had poured forth a volley of oaths, some peculiar to his native heath of Hog Lane,

others purloined from Whitechapel and Pimlico, still others learned during his years as able-bodied seaman and borrowed from the cosmopolitan throng of the South African gold fields, and others again that are the proud, linguistic privilege of the British army *in partibus infidelium.*

The sandy-haired gentleman had smoked a woodbine and listened, torn between awe and envy.

"Diddled me, 'e did, that there—crimson Ali Yusuf Khan!" the millionaire had exclaimed, kicking himself viciously in the shin. "Diddled me, by ——, the —— Bilked me, by —— Kept me 'ere in London, on purpose, for 'is ruddy trial wot's comin' orf in the September assizes so's to keep me aw'y from Calcutta where 'Ector Wade is rubbin' noses with the Hemperor of Dollars and Cents. Yes! They syled on the syme ship, the ——, I just found out. And 'ere Babu Bansi writes me that the princess, too, is on 'er w'y to Calcutta, doubtless to meet 'Ector and that there plurry Yank."

"But," the sandy-haired gentleman had interrupted, "it seems to me the Babu should have . . ."

"Should 'ave nothink!" Mr. Higgins was fair enough. "'E did 'is part. Cybled me as soon as the old Ameer 'ad kicked the bucket and told me wot 'e'd found out about . . . *you* know. 'Ere"—opening the small, plump safe and taking from amongst his private files the wire which Bansi had sent him the day of the Ameer's funeral, addressed to *"Gloops."*

He had read aloud:

"Tell Gloops meanwhile should look up Burke's Peerage find bally old nobility family whose escutcheon is double-headed lion and establish with them jolly old social relations."

"Well?" he had continued. "Didn't you and me chuck ourselves all over the bloomin' plyce and look through the British Museum and Westminster Abbey and the Office of 'Eraldry until we'd found the nyme of that there family with the double-'eaded lion? And, after Bansi 'ad wired me particulars, didn't I establish social relytions? Didn't I go down to Sussex and visit them—two-'eaded lions and mortgage and rotten grub and all? Didn't I do everything I bloody well could? Could anybody 'ave been more cyreful than me? And now—bilked, diddled—Gawd stroike me pink! That's wot I am! Done brown! Like a snut-nosed brat with the whoopin' cough and two left feet!"

Then he happened to glance at the newspaper headline, uttered the mysterious "Cricky!" laughed uproariously, and turned to the sandy-haired gentleman who was just about to decide that his employer had lost his reason.

"Don't you see?" he said. "Ain't Tollemache a son of that there two-'eaded lion family as much as 'Ector? And, with good old Sam Lewis puttin' on the thumb screws, ain't 'e every bit as down and out as 'Ector—Gawd bless 'em both? And 'e ain't as proud as 'Ector and I'll 'ave 'im eat out o' my 'and in no time. Mebbe it's even better, 'im bein' the older son. I ain't a religious man, 'avin' been too busy all my life and my people 'avin' been chapel folk, but I call this bloomin' providential!"

He looked at his watch.

"Five o'clock," he went on. "You'll find the Honorable Tollemache at the Criterion a-drownin' of his sorrers, and if you don't find 'im there, arsk the barmaid at the Lorraine, on Leicester Square. She'll know. Anyway, you get 'im and bring 'im 'ere as quick's you can!"

And the sandy-haired gentleman was off on a run, taking a short cut through Suffolk Lane and disappearing in the blotchy shadows of the Cannon Street Railway Terminus, while Mr. Preserved Higgins telephoned to his devoted adherent, Horatio Pinker of the metropolitan police, recently promoted to desk sergeant, and asked him to see to it that the case against Ali Yusuf Khan be quashed, immediately, and without any undesirable publicity.

He said that he had found the diamond necklace, that he was sorry to have, quite unwittingly, preferred a false charge against the Oriental, and that he would be only too glad to send the latter a good-sized check as balm for his hurt dignity and reputation.

At the other end of the wire, Sergeant Horatio Pinker turned to a colleague.

"Ain't Mr. Higgins the gent, though?" he asked.

Fifteen minutes later, the Cockney millionaire was wagging his russet beard at Tollemache Wade, who was sitting across from him, distracted, nervous, a little the worse for drink.

"I'll do it," wound up Mr. Higgins, "because of your father, m'boy. Is it a bargain?"

"Oh—I s'pose so."

"Can you be ready by to-morrow morning—let's s'y to-morrow noon?"

"Rather. There's nothing to keep me in town, you know—" and Tollemache thought, bitterly, that an hour earlier Gwendolyn de Vere's maid had told him that her mistress was not at home, and that, from her drawing-room, he had heard Gwendolyn's light laugh and Reggie Bullivant's answering basso.

"All right, m'boy. Buy everything you want. Charge it up to me. We leave to-morrow via Paris, Berlin, and Moscow, then to Orenburg, and over the Russian military r'ylw'y to Bokhara, Central Asia."

"I haven't a passport," said Tollemache Wade, "and I rather doubt if, with this scandal of mine, bankruptcy and drummin' out of the army for conduct unbecomin' and old Gwen givin' interviews to the reporters and all that, you know, the foreign office will give me one."

"Don't you bother your 'ead about passports, old cock. I 'ave friends from 'ere to Timbuktu, and I 'ave their number, every blasted last one's of 'em, and I knows 'ow to grease palms tactful-like. There's a lad at the Russian Embassy who'll do it dirt cheap. And now—off with you; and remember, me bucko, not a word to anybody, or the bargain's orf, see?"

That evening, using a bizarre code which completely baffled the local Tamerlanistan manager of the Anglo-Asian Cable Company, he sent a wire to his Babu satellite, and remarked to the sandy-haired gentleman:

"I'd like to see the fyces of the good old Hemperor of Dollars and Cents and of 'Ector when they finds

out 'ow I'm goin' to kick 'em in the south side of their pants—and they ain't goin' to find out for a long time yet. By the w'y, look up Babu Bansi's old correspondence and see wot the blighter's nyme is—you know, the governor of the western marches of Tamerlanistan. Phone me, and then go straight to Pollocks, on Bond Street, and get me a 'ole lot of them jewels Oriental potentytes likes—off-color diamonds and moonstones and opals and things. Pollocks will know. 'Ave 'em charge it up to me and damn the expense. Then, to-morrow early, go to the Smith & Union Bank . . ."

And a string of precise instructions, since Mr. Preserved Higgins' method of doing business, once he had arrived at a decision, was as simple and direct as a question in the Rule-of-Three.

Half an hour later he was closeted with his friend, Baron Vassily Ilyitch de Todleben, of the Russian Embassy, who was one of those men who have to have blatantly outward signs of the fact that they are enjoying themselves: a motor-car, a bottle of champagne, a chorus girl, or a chair in a roulette game; and who, being congenitally impecunious, and as congenitally unscrupulous, was willing not to let his left hand know what his right was taking.

"Yes," he said to Mr. Preserved Higgins, "I'll find out what I can about that Abderrahman Yahiah Khan —governor of the western marches of Tamerlanistan, didn't you say?"

"Yes, Baron."

"All right. I have a friend in Moscow, a high official in the Bureau for Pan-Russian Central-Asian

Propaganda. I shall send him a wire, and he will get into communication with you."

"Thanks, my lad, and don't you be afraid—it 'as nothing to do with politics. I ain't doin' any dirty work for England. It's just plain business."

"That's all right, Mr. Higgins." The Russian waved a white, excessively well-kept hand. "And now, as to the other little matter . . ."

And he affixed the Tsar's seal to two passports, one for Mr. Higgins himself, the other for a gentleman by the name of Henry Wallace Wilberforce who, to judge from the written description on the stamped paper, bore a marked physical resemblance to The Honorable Tollemache Wade.

The latter's brother, in the meantime, was worrying about the same matter of passports.

It did not take him over twenty-four hours to discover that he had been right in his surmise and that India, as represented and crystallized by its premier city of Calcutta, held out as little chance to him as home-England. It was the identical story from Park Street to the Howrah Bridge, from Fort William to the Towers of Silence, from the Presbyterian Church in Old Court House Street to Lal Bazaar: here and there he recognized familiar faces, some dead white with the heat of the tropics, others still ruddy with recent British beef and beer.

But it was as he had known it would be:

"Oh, yes. Wade. Hector Wade, old Dealle's son, chap who used to be in the Dragoons—*you* know. Rotten cad—you heard about it—what?"

And shoulders shrugging, eyes looking pity or contempt, and the very old maids who had been sent to India by their doting parents as a last chance at the matrimonial grab-bag, used their lorgnettes in the approved Mayfair style.

Yes. Calcutta was only an imperial suburb, a tropical annex to Belgravia and Marlborough House!

Within three days of his arrival the thing had become nearly a pathological obsession with him, and he seemed to read the sneering, malicious story of his disgrace in every face he saw in the crowded thoroughfares of Calcutta. He imagined that even the natives were looking at him with contempt: the patent-leathered Bengalis, oily with *ghee;* the lean, monkey-faced Madrassis; the acrid-scented Sansis with baskets of unclean food slung across their backs; the ruffianly Punjaubis, the soft-stepping, neat Parsees, and the big-boned, gray-eyed, white-skinned men from the farther north, who looked about them with an odd mixture of wonder and derision.

Later on, he used to remark that it was only the touch of the blade against his heart—"I know it sounds no end silly," he would add—that kept him, if not from becoming stark mad, then at least from committing assault and battery with intent to kill on some innocent Briton or harmless Bengali.

But, out of the blade, some flooding, massive energy, like a tide of unknown power and beauty and glory, seemed to surge through him, driving his misgivings away with the strength of tremendous, dynamic values and, finally, on the fifth day, quite suddenly, directing his feet to the government office on Park

Street where passports were made out for Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the North.

For he had made up his mind to leave Calcutta, India, to go clear, clear away—out into the far, yellow, brooding heart of Asia.

Perhaps Ali Yusuf Khan had been right.

Perhaps the old, tired, patient soul of Asia needed men like himself, young and strong and unhappy . . .

But when he stated his errand to Sir James Rivet-Carnac, the official in charge, that crimson-necked, purse-mouthed knight smiled in his most pinchbeck manner.

He toyed with his visitor's card.

"Pardon me," he said, "but are you by any chance that Hector Wade who . . ."

"I am!" came the terse reply. "What about it?"

"Only that the British-Indian government has a certain prestige to keep up in the North, in Central Asia —with Russia so infernally close, you know. We can't grant passports to"—he coughed; then, brutally —"to people of your kidney, Mr. Wade. What would the natives think of us? Good day, sir."

And, as Hector was about to cross the threshold:

"By the way, no use trying to cross the border without a passport. I am going to have you watched. Fair warning, don't you know."

He turned to his assistant after Hector had left:

"I wager long odds that young beggar made up his mind to go North, passport or no passport. Jolly determined looking, what? Too bad he did that foolish, caddish thing. Such a frightful waste of material

from an imperial point of view. Oh, well—we'll have him shadowed. We can't afford to have chaps like him floatin' loose about Asia—what with these stinking Babus preaching home rule and our beloved white Babus home in England helping them and all that . . ."

Sir James was a good physiognomist. He had read Hector's thoughts correctly. For, somehow, the other's refusal to issue him a passport had only strengthened his stubborn resolution to go North, to cross the Himalayas, to look beyond the ranges for the chance which England and India, the Empire, denied him.

Yes. He would go.

But—how?

For even if he managed to evade Sir James Rivet-Carnac's watchers, there was the vital question of money, since the ocean journey, including the tips aboard and other incidental expenses, and his five days' stay in Calcutta, had practically exhausted the money which Ali Yusuf Khan had lent him.

"What shall I do? How can I go?"

He asked himself the question as he looked from the balcony of his room, out into the night cloaked streets whence rose a confused mingling of sounds: voices in many languages, rising, then decreasing, the shouts of itinerant fruit and lemonade venders, the tinkle-tinkle-tinkle of some woman's glass bracelets, a shred of laughter flung carelessly to the winds, a sudden dramatic shriek . . .

The sounds leaped up to his ear—the sounds of

India, of Asia—cruel, beckoning, mysterious, scented, fascinating, portentous, inexplicable—

The rune of Asia—and how could he resist the call of it?

Something tugged at his soul.

If he had wings to fly from the window, to launch himself across the purple haze of the town, to alight on some flat roof, then to rise again and swing out and beyond on the sweep of the northbound wind across the great Indian peninsula; over the central jungles that stretched like a great sea of vegetation, an entangled, exuberant blending of leaves and spiky creepers and waxen, musky flowers, a rolling wave of green life; over the perfumed valley of Kashmere, the foot-hills that rolled down like enormous, overlapping planes; clear across the carved, sardonic immensities of the Himalayas where the harried sun hid and shivered amongst the northern snows . . . and out into the heart of Asia . . . if he had wings to fly!

"What shall I do? How can I go?"

Again he asked himself the question, and, suddenly, he thought of Ali Yusuf Khan's parting words:

"Trust the blade. It will speak to you when man fails you—or Fate."

He felt slightly self-conscious, slightly ludicrous. For he was an Englishman, a European, an average Occidental swinging, intellectually and emotionally, half way between Christianity and biology, and what was all this painted, twisted, mazed Oriental tommyrot

to him? All this mad talk about trusting a dagger, asking a senseless, lifeless length of forged steel to speak to him!

His hand fingered the hilt of the weapon—he had not unsheathed it since that night in Coal Yard Street—while his mind, like a captive bird, was beating against the cage bars of his prosy, two-and-two-is-four intelligence, his typically British refusal to believe the incredible—even after he had seen it happen.

Then his lips curled in a lop-sided smile.

"Oh, well," he murmured, apologetically, in the general direction of the moon that was racing through the clouds like delicate ivory flotsam, "it can't hurt," and he drew the blade from the jeweled shagreen scabbard into which Ali Yusuf Khan had fitted it and, from a piece of silver wire scroll work just below the hilt where it had been wedged, a paper fluttered to the ground.

Mechanically he picked it up, and saw that there were words on it, in Persian, signed "Ali Yusuf Khan," and read:

"If you need help, go to the house of Mehmet Iddrissy Khan. You will find him in the house at the end of Hyder Ahmet's Gully, in the Colootallah section, beyond the Machua Bazaar."

Hector gave a low laugh. He did not know why he laughed; did not have time to psychologize about it. For, the next second, he had picked up his hat, left the room and the hotel, and was out into the smoky, purple, fantastic Indian night, while, two seconds later, his mind and body acting together with almost un-

canny precision, he remembered Sir James Rivet-Carnac's warning that he would be followed, turned swiftly beneath the haggard light of a street lamp, saw that a short, lean Madrassi was slinking close behind him, and had the point of his blade on the man's windpipe.

"Be careful," he whispered, "this knife may slip. Talk just as if we were friends."

"Yes, saheb." The man's teeth clicked together like castanets.

"All right. Now—answer quick and low. From the police, aren't you?"

"Yes, saheb."

"Anybody else following me?"

"No, saheb."

"Sure you are speaking the truth?"

"Yes, yes, yes! By Vishnu and Shiva!"—as the blade was pricking his skin.

"Good. Now come along. And walk gently—be careful or . . ."

And he walked the Madrassi away from the Great Eastern Hotel and into a little, shadow-blotched park which he had visited earlier in the day and which was deserted, except for the ubiquitous crows.

"Sorry I have to be rough," he said; and, the next minute, he had him on his back, had him gagged securely with his handkerchief and the heavy leather gloves he carried in his pocket; tore off the man's turban cloth and waist shawl, and tied him hand and foot.

Then, very leisurely. he left the park and walked

to Old Court House Street where he asked the stolid English policeman the way to the Colootallah.

"Place there called Hyder Ahmet's Gully, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. But I wouldn't go there if I were you, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because," replied the policeman, who had twenty years' Calcutta service to his record, "it is the rottenest, stinkingest, most unregenerate patch of crime in our whole East Indian Empire. Because a white man ain't safe there—leastways this time of night, sir. Oh, well"—as Hector insisted—"it's your own funeral. You go down through the Burra Bazaar—"

"I know where that is—"

"Past the Jora Bagan and the Machua . . ." and he gave the directions as precisely as if it had been London.

"Thank you."

And a pleasant tinkle of silver, and Hector was off toward the Burra Bazaar at a good round clip, and bidding farewell to the white man's Calcutta, to Government House and green tea and respectability.

On he walked, past the Jora Bagan and the Machua, and plunged into a network of narrow streets where the poor, unwashed, and diseased of all India's motley races seemed to live together in friendship and evil odors. Not many lights stole through the shuttered balconies of the packed, greasy houses. Overhead, between the two façades, he saw a strip of paleness which evidently was doing duty for a bit of moonlit sky.

"Where is Hyder Ahmet's Gully?" he asked a native.

"Over there, saheb!"

The man pointed and, with a word of thanks, Hector was off again, through streets that grew steadily more narrow and crooked, with a glimpse of smoky, discouraged sky above the roof tops revealing scarcely three yards of breadth, the roadway ankle deep in squidgy, sticky blue slime, beggars and roughs and lepers slinking and pushing against him, and a fetid stink hanging over it all like an evil pall; until, directed by another native who, like the policeman, gave him good-natured warning and advised him to return to his hotel, he found himself in Hyder Ahmet Khan's Gully, a long, crooked cul-de-sac that ran the gamut of white-washed walls without windows or doors, mysterious, useless looking, and that was sealed at the farther end by a tall, lonely house, rising into the purple welter of the night with an immense abandon of fretted, tortured stone and masonry work, with bird's-nest balconies and crazy, twisted, bulbous roofs and spires, the whole thing typically Hindu in its maniacal, architectural extravagance.

Not a soul was about. There was not even a sound. It was as if all life had been cut short at the entrance of the Gully, and everything Hector was—racially, traditionally, culturally—bristled within him. He saw a glimmer of burnished metal, bent, looked, and saw that it was the lock of a door set low into the house, to the left of it a brass plate with the name of Mehmet Iddrissy Khan engraved in Persian letters, to the right an old-fashioned, iron knocker.

He stood undecided, rather frightened. Somehow,

he felt that it was this door which stood between life as he had known it heretofore and the life of the future—whatever the future might bring.

Should he take the—yes—the plunge? For it was that.

Again he hesitated. Then, suddenly, a wisp of laughter drifted out of the nowhere, a woman's laughter, soft, tinkling, silvery, and he took a deep breath like a man about to dive, and lifted the door knocker—brought it down sharply—*bang!*—with a dull, portentous thud; and, a few moments later, from the inside, came the brushing of feet, a cough, and the door opened to disclose a tall, elderly Hindu who was holding in his right hand a flickering oil lamp and who surveyed the late visitor with suspicion.

"What do you wish?" he asked, and Hector thought it typical of the neighborhood, the Colootallah, that the man did not use the courteous "saheb."

"I wish to speak to Mehmet Iddrissy Khan."

"About what?"

Hector flared up.

"None of your confounded business," he cried; then, as the other was about to close the door, he stopped him with a gesture, laughed, drew the blade from his pocket and gave it, hilt foremost, to the other.

"Show this to your master," he said. "Tell him it is all the credentials I have."

"Very well;" and the Hindu shut the door in Hector's face.

Hector waited. Afterwards he used to say that, had it not been for the fact that the other had taken

the blade with him, he would have walked away as fast as his legs would have let him. But—"the blade was an integral part of me, don't you see?" he would add. "I couldn't have left without it. Of course not. That bit of steel had stuck by me."

He did not have to wait long. For, a minute later, the door opened again, and this time the Hindu salaamed deeply, and there was something almost like awe in his opaque eyes, and respect in his voice as he bade the other enter.

"Thy people are sick with longing for thee, saheb!" he said in purring Persian. "Careful, Protector of the Pitiful! The steps are slippery!"

And, the lamp high in his hand and throwing flickering, fantastic shadows, he led Hector through a labyrinth of rooms, some of them ablaze with raw, clashing colors, others in dull, somber shades which melted into each other; through wide corridors, supported by pillars whose capitals were shaped into pendant lotus forms, or crowned with lateral struts carved into the likenesses of horsemen or war-girt elephants. There was furniture of all ages and climes, from century old sandal-wood pieces chip-carved into flat relief to massive tables topped with slabs of Bokharan lapis lazuli; from wonderful, old, red Chinese lac to, here and there, a horribly clashing, cheap European incongruity . . . certainly a very wealthy man's house, decided Hector.

Once or twice they encountered native servants in rainbow-colored silks, who stepped aside and salaamed with extended hands, but even in those rooms which

were empty of human life Hector was maddeningly conscious of watching eyes and listening ears. He said something of the sort to his guide who smiled.

"This is India, saheb," he said. "This is an Indian house. Day and night, it is full of eyes and ears." He stopped. "Look. Listen."

He pointed at a bull's-eye cut low in an unexpected wall. He coughed loudly. There was a rustle of silken garments, and the noise of bare feet pattering away.

Another time, when directly between his feet Hector heard a sound of deep breathing, the Hindu showed him a tiny peep-hole in the mosaic work which covered the floor.

"A servant's servant," he whispered, "listening to the gossip of the inner rooms, so as to bring a report to his superior, another report to another superior, still another, until it finally reaches the right ear."

"Whose?" came the blunt question.

"The ear of the Princess Aziza Nurmahal, ruler of Tamerlanistan;" and, just as Hector was dim-groping in his memory where he had heard that last word, just as some recess in his brain flashed back the reply that Mr. Preserved Higgins had mentioned it a second before Hector's fist had hit him between the eyes and stretched him unconscious on the London pavement, the Hindu repeated:

"The Princess Aziza Nurmahal, ruler of Tamerlanistan!" with a loud voice, like a herald, drew aside a brocade curtain stiff with embroidery, and motioned the other to enter.

Hector stepped across the threshold, while his guide salaamed and disappeared.

Curled upon a couch, he saw a slim young girl, dressed native style in a *sari* of pale, rose-colored silk, shot with orange and violet and bordered with tiny seed pearls. Her face was small and round and exquisitely chiseled. Her hair was parted in the middle and of a glossy, bluish black, mingled with flowers and jewels.

She rose at Hector's approach, smiled, and walked up to him. It was evident that she expected the Englishman to speak; for an eager light was in her immense, black eyes; her narrow hands fluttered like butterflies; her lips were half open.

Hector coughed. He did not know what to say, did not know what to make of the whole situation. He had expected to find some wealthy native merchant who needed a young Englishman for his business; perhaps an elderly Brahmin who wanted a tutor for his son; perhaps some semi-independent Indian princeling who wished to avail himself of his military training.

But—to be ushered, in the middle of the night, into the presence of a young girl, a young girl of the Orient, a princess?

And to find her alone, and unveiled?

Why—it was incredible; and, momentarily, a sordid, unworthy thought flashed through his mind, to be quickly scotched as he looked at her friendly open face.

But he was tongue-tied, and then, quite suddenly, she threw her arms about his neck, drew his head down, and kissed him full on the lips.

"I have waited for thy coming, my lord," she said, in a low, musical voice. "I have waited long!"

And Hector did exactly what any other clean bred, self-conscious young Briton would have done under the circumstances.

He blushed a painful brick-red, tried to remove the gentle pressure from around his neck, and murmured something very foolish and entirely inadequate:

"Please! I say—you mustn't—you know . . ."—positively mid-Victorian.

And the girl broke into a peal of irrepressible laughter.

"It was not the kiss of the love of passion, my lord," she said. "It was the kiss of a sister's love."

"A—sister's love?"

He felt more clumsy, less sure of himself, than ever.

"Yes!" the princess looked at him, utterly serious. "For we are sister and brother, thou and I! Rocked in the same cradle of Fate! Mated to Fate by the wooing of swords!"

Words which were quite without sense or meaning to The Honorable Hector Wade who, at that moment, was wishing fervently that he were back on the yellow, sandy Downs of Sussex.

CHAPTER X

Telling how Romance comes to those who accept it, asking no questions, and how a grown man returns to life, as a newborn child.

THE very next moment, with startling suddenness, Hector passed from the stage of boyish, awkward, rather petty embarrassment to one of tremendous, voiceless excitement.

Not for the slightest fraction of a second did he lose his grip on his natural, perceptive faculties, did he forget his sober English commonsense. On the contrary, straight through, his five senses worked harmoniously together. Even while his eyes saw on a low taboret not far from him the ancient blade which had been his "Open Sesame!" ever since he had left the house of his ancestors, while his hand, almost automatically, picked it up and returned it to his pocket, his brain flashed the message that he should ask this tiny, picturesque bit of Oriental womanhood bluntly to tell him what she meant by her mysterious words.

Already his lips had shaped the query: "What *do* you . . . ?" when, instantaneously, an abstruse something in his soul surged up and submerged the tail end of his sentence in a bizarre, yet deliberate decision, realization rather, that he must accept whatever Fate had in store for him unquestioningly.

He bowed low before the princess.

"I, too, have waited long," he said, "waited long for the wooing of swords!"

And, strangely, incongruously, though at the time there was no sense to him in his own words, he felt, he knew, that he was not telling a lie, that he was not acting a part, that a hidden, yet enormously vital element of his inner consciousness had dictated the words—out of a terribly intense, terribly ancient, terribly prolonged yearning.

Neither then, nor during the baroque, twisted adventures of the weeks to come, did he stop to analyze why thus, without a question, without a concise doubt, without a demand for explanation, without natural, normal curiosity even, he bowed his head before this strange Fate that had come to him out of the purple Indian night—with a young Oriental princess' soft kiss, with her dim words about Brother and Sister and the Wooing of Swords.

Later on, he would try to explain it out of existence by saying that the romance, the flaming spirit of the moment, had carried him away as the wind carries away brittle leaves; that his old life was dead, that here beckoned the cresset of a new life which he must follow, untrammeled by the past, untrammeled even by the desires and doubts and natural reactions of the past.

And this attempt at explanation was palpably wrong; was the bitter fruit of his racial English inhibition to be as logical and inquisitive and truth-seeking in psychic, as he was in mental and physical,

matters. Had it not been for this racial inhibition, this artificial, typically Anglo-Saxon restraint, he would have told himself that, the very moment he saw Aziza Nurmahal, the very moment he heard her fantastic, incongruous greeting, the impression came to him that he had lived through all this before and that the answer to it was not in the princess' life, not in his own, not in any one individual's puny, negligible existence, but in the throbbing, eternal life of Asia.

He would have told himself that which, subpsychically, he knew to be the truth: namely, that this Asia was not a mere Continent, steaming and flaunting and sweating beneath the coppery sun of the tropics, not a mere geographical or political term, but a Being; a giant Being, with pulses and feelings and motley ambitions of its own; and that he, Hector Wade, Englishman out of Sussex, and reputed card-cheater, was an integral part of this Being.

Thus his subconscious thoughts, those thoughts which he was ashamed to shape even in the secrecy and close intimacy of his own soul; while the princess clapped her hands and, a moment later, a tall, elderly Moslem, green turbaned, simply dressed, came into the room. There was something about him, less an actual, physical resemblance, than in his easy charm of manner and the strange, attractive mingling of kindliness and shrewdness that glistened in his eyes and played about his lips, which reminded Hector of Ali Yusuf Khan.

Aziza Nurmahal ran up to him, and took both his hands in hers.

"The saheb has decided, Mehmet Iddrissy Khan," she said, vivaciously, joyously. "He, too, has waited long for the wooing of swords!"

She turned to the Englishman as if asking him to confirm her words, and the latter suppressed a grim, sardonic smile.

The wooing of swords—he thought to himself—rather like some dashed Greek tragedy chorus, and about as intelligible to him, chiefly considering that he had never been exactly tophole at the classics!

But, what reason did he have to vent his mocking, unhappy humor on these people, who trusted him, surely trusted him, since they had let him, the saheb, the Christian, the foreigner, who was an outcast from his own land, into the jealously guarded intimacy of their Oriental household—and at night—with no credentials except an ancient weapon with a blurred, golden pattern on hilt and blade? And there was something so anxiously appealing in the girl's hooded, sable eyes, something so pathetically expectant in Mehmet Iddrissy Khan's shrewd, gray, gold-flecked eyes, and, finally, something in his own soul, so abstrusely compelling and jubilantly reckless, that his spoken words gave no inkling of the ironic thoughts that had flashed through his mind.

"Yes!" he said, looking straight at the others.

And he added, in purring, gliding Persian metaphor, in that cannily hyperbolic manner dear to turbaned and maddeningly annoying to hatted humanity:

"What I could not find in the written book, the blade whispered to me. My eyes were red and swollen with the revel of pain and despair, my soul was a

bloated and useless thing, my life a blackened crucible —but the blade flashed free, and I heard the muffled, sobbing drums of victory!"

"Rather neatly turned, that!" he said to himself, with a fleeting recurrence to his disturbing, saturnine mood, while Mehmet Iddrissy Khan raised lean, brown hands.

"Praise Allah!" he said, sonorously. "Praised be Allah, the Just, the All-Seeing, the All-Powerful, the King of the Day of Judgment, the Holder of the Scales of Mercy and of Wisdom with the Strength of His Hands, the Opener of the Locks of Souls with the golden Keys of His Understanding!"—and, in that typically Oriental way which so distresses Europeans and which permits its possessor to pass rapidly, without jarring break and without the slightest feeling of ludicrousness or self-consciousness, from a gorgeously epic or religious height to the level, drab plane of constructive, logically reasoning practicability:

"Time presses, saheb. When wilt thou be ready to start for the North, for Central Asia?"

"To-night," replied Hector, "this very minute," thinking with bitter satisfaction that there was nothing West of the Howrah Bridge or East of Fort William to keep him in Calcutta except—yes!—he added in his mind, then with the spoken word:

"Passport! What about a passport? I talked to Rivet-Carnac to-day and . . ."

"Insh'allah!" Mehmet Iddrissy Khan cut through the sentence with a wagging, derisive thumb on which twinkled a great star sapphire.

"The little, little, little jackal howls," he said, sententiously, metaphorically, "but—tell me—will my old buffalo die therefore?"

And, while Hector laughed at the simile and the princess looked from one of the two men to the other, smiling, very much with the satisfied air of a hostess who has introduced two congenial souls to each other, he continued:

"Doubtless Rivet-Carnac saheb is fifteen devils—*and* a pig. But we—we of the North . . ."

"We are sixteen *pukka* devils—without as much as the pig's smell!" softly interrupted Hector to whom the half forgotten lore of bazaar jests and bazaar quips and slang was returning with every minute.

"Good, by the teeth of God!" exclaimed the older man, hugging the Englishman to his thick chest. "Thou art a man after my own heart—a twister of words! A turner of neat phrases! And—an honest man! For only an honest man can twist words for the right purpose! Thou hast a good head on thy shoulders—"

"And a good head has a thousand hands," suggested the princess.

"Rightly said, rejoicer of hearts! A thousand hands—and each bearing a gift or a sword for Tamerlanistan! But, to return to Rivet-Carnac, to return, by the same token, to the jackal—*and* the pig, there may be no passport for Hector Wade. Yet—what need will there be of passports and talk and babble of passports to a young prince of the Gengizkhani clan, returning to his own land, vouched for by myself, a respectable and wealthy man and a member of the

Legislative Council of the Calcutta Municipality, decorated, deservedly, with the Star of the Indian Empire? A young prince, furthermore, who travels in the retinue of the ruling princess of Tamerlanistan! The jackal—*and* the pig—will bow their filth-scabbed necks. And the British Raj will also bow—for Central Asia is Central Asia . . ."

"And the Russian squints down from the North!" smiled Hector. "I understand!"

"As I knew thou wouldst! And now, follow me, young heart of my old heart, and"—running a sly hand over the other's flannel-clad shoulder—"we'll change these foreign clothes of yours into a dress more befitting a prince of the Gengizkhani."

Three hours later, with the sudden young sun of the tropics splintering out of the east and all Calcutta awakening and sitting up to its daily round of abusing itself, the Government, and the weather, Hector Wade was sitting in a low victoria drawn by a brace of squealing, shaggy, rat-like, up-country ponies. He was dressed as became a rollicking, rich young Central Asian prince come to Calcutta to see the sights, to buy useless goods and, perchance, get drunk on foreign wine; from immense, black Persian lamb cap to yellow leather slippers with coquettishly upturned toes, from richly embroidered waistband, with the hilt of the ancient blade showing grimly above it, to open-work silk socks in hopeful cerise, from the foppish sprig of rose-geranium behind his left ear to the great, flat-cut canary diamond that twinkled on his thumb. By his side sat the Princess Aziza Nurmahal in a

traveling *sari* of gray- and green-striped muslin, the soft flower of her face "veiled against the inquisitive glances of this stinking Southland," to quote Mehmet Iddrissy Khan who had bid them good-by on the threshold of his house in the Colootallah.

They were followed by another roomy carriage that held a dozen of the princess' chattering, giggling, betel chewing servants under the command of Mahsud Hakki, a huge, crimson-turbaned Nubian eunuch who performed his office with a great deal of pompous dignity and without the slightest sense of humor—which latter failing had no effect whatsoever on the servants, who talked to each other and, when the carriage pulled up at the railway station, to their mistress, with all the startling, democratic familiarity of the Orient; too, with all the primitive indelicacy in regard to matters physical of that same Orient.

Talking loudly and pointing shameless and decidedly grimy fingers, they mentioned, in Hector's plain hearing, that he—*"Al Nakia,"* they called him and the Englishman hunted in vain through his Persian and Behari vocabulary to find what the word meant—would be a fairly good-looking man, only:

"Thy nose is too thin, like the rawhide whips the Tajik caravan men use to spank their lean camels' lean buttocks, and thy belly is like a flattened purse!" remarked a toothless, withered hag who had the princess' jewels in her care; while a grizzled, gnarled old Persian woman, who was entrusted with Aziza Nurmahal's compact silver-and-enamel traveling water pipe, said, passionlessly, as one stating a fact known to all the world:

"If, when I was young and my heart had never a crack, a man such as thou, Al Nakia, had whispered words of passion in my ear, I would have told him to first fill his gullet with rich meats, and then I would have said to him . . ."—something decidedly improper which sent everybody, including the princess and half-a-dozen stray Calcutta natives of various castes and complexions, into fits of riotous, Asiatic laughter; and Hector himself joined—was rather glad of it, in fact, for it proved that these people had accepted him as one of their own, that to them he was not the saheb who must be kowtowed to in public and cruelly, mercilessly derided and parodied in private.

Then a wave of excitement, inside the station, while they squabbled with the railway porters and guards and ticket punchers over baggage and ice and bedding and hubble-bubbles and baskets of food and goglets of water and a number of mysterious, strongly scented packages, which the railway officials declared could under no circumstances be stowed away into the "te-rain, the valuable property of the honorable saheb-log's railway company—no, no!—under no conditions whatsoever!" while the Tamerlani servants swore by all the Saints of Shia Islam and by a variety of rather more worldly oaths that, come what may, everything *would* be stowed away where they could see it.

"For we know well you thieving, lousy Southern piglings—you eaters of unclean abominations—you cursed worshipers of a flower and a ring-tailed monkey! You could steal food from between our lips, and our insides would be none the wiser! Away, spawn of leprous gutter rats, indelicate, especially unbeautiful,

and lacking in refinement! This is a princess from the North traveling in state with her own people—a *pukka* princess—and not a sniveling, unimportant Maharanee from the South. Away!"

"It is against regulation seventeen, paragraph eight!" cried a Babu railway clerk, brown faced, agate eyed, very fat and oily, and clad in white gauze which, considering his fantastic bodily contours, gave him a grotesque and not at all decent appearance. "Regulation says that . . ."

And he was promptly and vituperatively told what to do with the regulation, with the book which included it, the saheb who had written it; and when, in a magnificent flight of Bengali imagination, the Babu swore by Shiva and Vishnu and Brahm that the Viceroy himself insisted on this particular rule in regard to baggage being carried out to the letter, the keeper of the princess' jewels told him, in a stage whisper, that, the very next time she came to Calcutta, she would call on the Viceroy and make him eat stick!

Hector, meanwhile, had been talking to Aziza Nurmahal who, in answer to his question, replied that Al Nakia was a Tartar word, the aboriginal language of Tamerlanistan, and that it meant "The Expected."

"Expected—by whom?" puzzled Hector.

"But surely thou knowest—why—" She seemed a little surprised. "Expected—according to the ancient prophecy! Expected—to seal the wooing of swords!"

"More mystifying, unintelligible wooing of swords stuff!" thought Hector, while the princess complicated matters yet more by saying:

"These servants can be trusted. They were my

father's slaves. They know all about thy blade"—touching its hilt where it protruded from Hector's waist shawl—"and, too, about the other blade!"

"The other blade!" thought Hector. "As if this one wasn't enough."

Then, with a loud voice:

"One thing is sure. I shall have to stop this incipient racial war if we intend to take the train."

He gave a few rapid, decisive orders to both the railway officials and the servants. The latter triumphantly piled all the baggage, including a screeching, mangy parrot in a rickety bamboo cage which the pipe woman had bought the last moment from a grinning, splay-footed jungly-Bhil, into a first-class compartment, very much to the disgust of its occupant, a majestic Anglo-Indian lady with a Wellingtonian beak who decided to write a letter about it to the *Times of India* as soon as she reached her husband's hill station. Everybody went aboard, the princess in one compartment with one woman servant and the eunuch who, immediately, pulled down the rattan window shades tight, the rest of the servants in a second compartment, and Hector himself in a third, alone but for the company of one of the princess' people, a red-faced, stony-eyed Tartar who at once squatted on his haunches, at Hector's feet, stuffed his huge mouth full with finely cut *pan* and promptly fell asleep.

Fifteen minutes earlier, the Eurasian station master had shouted himself hoarse with:

"All aboard the te-rain—for Lahore, Rawalpindi, and the North!"

Fifteen times he had blown his shiny, official silver whistle.

Fifteen minutes it had taken to solve the quarrel between the railway people and the Tamerlani; fifteen more to rescue some of the former from the hands of a party of ruffianly, drunken Rajputs whom they had tried to overcharge.

And yet another fifteen minutes elapsed before the train finally got under way with a wheezy cough.

For this was India, this was the East, to whom all Time, including railway time tables, also including the eternities, is only a matter of yawn and stretch and shrug, and to whom hurry is an ungentlemanly pastime of Western barbarians.

On then, to the North!

Through the stark, swollen, heat-scorched yellowness of Bengal, with fleeting glimpses of blue-garbed natives tilling the fields and patient buffaloes turning the water wheels and once in a while a squat, shimmering city seen vaguely through the delicate tracery of the trees!

A night and a day and another night, during which Hector saw nothing of the princess who, since there were Christians and Hindus and Eurasians, foreigners all, aboard, was respecting the proper customs of *purdah* and *harem,* of veil and woman's seclusion under the Nubian's jealous eyes, but who sent him frequent, joyful, hopeful messages through the servants who brought him food . . . while the train

rolled out into the Indian desert, between white, rush-tipped hillocks, with the fantastic, red granite mountains of Rajputana stabbing the far horizon with twisted peaks.

A strange land, a motley land, which Hector had not seen since he was a child. A land of too much color, gold and heliotrope and lake and purple, picked out with glaring white high lights, nicked with sulphur yellow and glaucous green, and edged with chocolate brown and luminous blues.

But Hector Wade had no eyes for the landscape. For—was it impulse? Was it instinct—or imagination?

He did not know. Did not even try to analyze.

He only knew that a great, portentous voice was calling to him across the distance, from the North beyond the snow-bound Afghan mountain passes, and it called with the language of the past—and the future . . . with the steely, swishing sob of crossing blades.

A puissant and compelling force surged through him. It came from the outside, springing, nevertheless, from something of which he was a living, throbbing part, suffusing him with deep, triumphant joy . . . and it was, suddenly, with an almost physical shock, that he realized how with every mile the West, England, his old life, his old interests, his old customs and reactions and prejudices, were slipping away from him . . . they—*and* Jane Warburton! The girl who was dearer to him than the dwelling of kings!

He loved her—and now he had lost her, for ever, and his heart was like a house without any light, where

his desires and passions wandered about, like lonely children lost in the dark . . .

"Next stop Rawalpindi!" came the Eurasian railway guard's strident voice. "Change trains there for Peshawar and the North!"

Oh, well—Hector shrugged his shoulders, as if already the fatalistic East had submerged his soul—it had to be.

His old life was dead, and his new life had begun. And it must be untrammeled—by the past, the likes and dislikes, the endeavors and ambitions of the past.

Untrammeled even by—the love of the past?

No, no! His love could never be of the past. It was of the present, the future, all shoreless eternity. His love was a living thing, would ever be a living thing, come what may.

Why, he couldn't do without Jane. She was the breath of life itself to him and . . .

Hector Wade kicked himself in the shin.

"I *am* a silly ass," he remarked, at a little wayside station, to a crimson necked vulture that was sitting on a low wall, flopping its dirt-gray wings and making improper noises in its scrawny throat. "Hector Wade is dead and forgotten. There is only Al Nakia left!"

"Al Nakia!"

He repeated the word aloud, and the Tartar servant sat up and rubbed his sleepy eyes.

"Didst thou call, my lord?" he asked.

CHAPTER XI

Mainly about shoes and ships and sealing wax, and cabbages and kings.

Just about the time when Hector and his party were changing trains for the Northern frontier at Rawalpindi Junction, beset by a crowd of natives in every conceivable state of ruffianly raggedness and imploring in every known and some unknown dialects to be hired as porters, guides, dog boys, sweepers, grooms, butlers, cooks, and tailors, Sir James Rivet-Carnac sat facing Mr. Ezra W. Warburton and the latter's daughter in their suite at the Hotel Semiramis, busy with a small cup of coffee and a large glass of brandy, while the American was busy with a large cup of coffee and a small glass of brandy—thus both gentlemen somehow illustrating the divergent characteristics in matters bibulous of the two branches of the Anglo-Saxon race.

Sir James beamed. Sir James smiled. Sir James talked softly. Sir James waved pudgy, courteous hands.

For not only had the dinner been perfect, from turtle soup to an odorous Kashmere curry with fresh vegetable chutney, but, furthermore, he was a sensible man, who respected wealth, and knew that Mr. Warburton represented powerful Anglo-American financial interests.

"Of course, my dear sir," he said. "There will be

no trouble about passports for yourself and your daughter. No trouble either about the journey—anything my department can do to make the trip comfortable—anything at all—pray command me!"

He lit a fresh cigar.

"I have already said a word or two to the local agent of the Ameer of Afghanistan," he went on, "and you will be passed straight through that country. On the other hand . . ."

He coughed, and was silent for a few seconds, collecting his thoughts.

He was in a quandary.

For he was a servant of that intricate and extremely complicated machinery for civilization, progress, and the blessed average decencies called the British Empire, that world-flung organization which spreads like a fine-mesh net over the whole globe and in which, through logical consequence, there are many currents and undercurrents, often one government department giving orders or recommendations completely at variance with those of another, every bit as important, department.

And, while he had received instructions from the India Office to put himself absolutely at the disposition of Mr. Warburton and to make that gentleman's trip to the North as easy and pleasant as possible, another department, closely connected with the Home Office in London, had asked him, quite *sub rosa* and quite decisively, to see to it that the American's journey to Tamerlanistan should be delayed at least two or three months.

Sir James did not know, could not know, that it was through the subterranean influence of an eccentric Cockney millionaire, Mr. Preserved Higgins, that the latter instructions had been sent him. But he did know that, unless he walked a delicate tight-rope between the two departments, his dearest wish would not be realized at the next royal birthday honors: namely, a change from Sir James, Kt., to Sir James, Bart.

Gently, therefore, he proceeded to hedge.

"Mr. Warburton," he said, "I understand that Tamerlanistan is rather in an unsettled condition just now. The old Ameer died, you know . . ."

"Yes. I know."

"Well—we have no consular representative there—it makes it rather awkward for me . . ."

"Don't worry," rejoined the financier. "I have my own man up there—Babu Chandra."

"A Bengali?"

"Yes."

"Can you trust him? Not that I am trying to impeach the man's honesty, but . . ."

"I understand, Sir James. I know the sort of reputation the Babus have hereabouts. But my particular Babu is all right."

"I am so glad," murmured Sir James—and lied.

Presently, he tried a different method.

"Mr. Warburton," he asked, "is your business in Tamerlanistan very pressing?"

The other was a cautious man.

"Why do you ask?" he countered, bluntly.

"Oh—please—do not misunderstand me. I am not trying to pry into your affairs. But, whatever they are, I would like to know if they are very pressing—if there is any great hurry about them."

"A month or two makes no difference."

"Good!" exclaimed Sir James and, when the American looked up with quick suspicion, he immediately proceeded to that operation which is vulgarly known as drawing a herring across one's trail.

"Mr. Warburton," he purred, "you must forgive my —how shall I put it . . . ?"

"Butting in—that's what we call it back home in America!" chimed in Jane, to her father's horror.

"Thank you, my dear lady." Sir James was not at all embarrassed and, turning to her father:

"We feel rather responsible for you, don't you know."

"Awfully kind of you."

"Not at all, not at all. But—there you are. With prominent international men like yourself—the—oh—the responsibility . . ."

"What are you driving at?" demanded Mr. Warburton, again becoming suspicious.

"Only that this is the very worst season of the year to travel about India. Cholera outbreak in Lahore, you know, and the heat and the flies and all that. Wait till after the monsoon . . ."

"But—"

"This brittle heat," the other went on, smiling at

his own shrewdness and thinking that right here he was going to even his score with Miss Warburton, "is positively deadly to delicate complexions."

"That settles it," said Jane, serenely. "We'll wait till after the monsoons, shan't we, dad?"

Mr. Warburton agreed. After all, he decided, there was no hurry and it would be better for him to wait until he had word from the Babu Chandra, and he had found out that Hector had left his hotel and, presumably Calcutta, so that he needn't be nervous in regard to his daughter.

And so Sir James returned to attend to some late work at his office—where, a few days later, he frowned at a report telegraphed by one of his sub-agents stationed at Peshawar, near the border of Afghanistan, which said that no person resembling Mr. Hector Wade had crossed the border or tried to; only the bi-weekly caravans for Kabul and Kandahar that filed through the Khybar Pass, and some independent Afghan, Sart, and Hindki traders with proper passports. Furthermore, for a while to come, it would be impossible for said Hector Wade to get through the Khybar or any other of the minor Northwestern Province border stations as, because of some threatening trouble with the tribesmen, nobody would be allowed, until further orders, to travel out of Peshawar for the North, with the exception of the reigning princess of Tamerlanistan, to whom British, Afghans, and warring tribesmen had granted the courtesy of free conduct.

She was accompanied by her retinue and her cousin, the young prince Al Nakia.

By this time, the latter, *alias* Hector Wade, was becoming familiar with at least an inkling of what he was supposed to accomplish after he would have reached Tamerlanistan, though he was as ignorant as ever as to the special reasons why Fate, with Ali Yusuf Khan and an ancient blade playing Deputy-Fates, had chosen him as the instrument.

The princess' party arrived in Peshawar on a Monday, early, just as morning came with the young sun gilding the carved struts of Kabul Gate, spiking a crimson diadem across the face of the lower Himalayas, shooting a glimmering, yellow wedge of light down the length of the Khybar Pass, straight into the stony entrails of Afghanistan.

They were evidently expected, for carriages met them at the station, and they drove rapidly, through that boisterous northern city which guards the gateway of India and seals the southern end of the Khybar Pass that points straight, like a pistol, at the heart of Asia; through the whirling, choking dust that rose in clouds from the dirty streets; past crowds of ruffianly, swaggering border men, to the house of a wealthy Tamerlani tradesman who dealt in salt and hides and tea; and, shortly after their tiffin of mutton stewed in honey and seasoned with asafœtida, licorice water, sticky sweetmeats, and unripe melons had been served in their host's pavilion, trouble came with a bearded Tajik courier's official, peaked, black turban showing above the scraggly mellingtonia in the yard, and his throaty call: "A visitor! A visitor for the princess!"—and, a minute later, the visitor arrived, atop a smelly, furry camel, yelling, cursing, using the

rawhide whip unmercifully, the animal trampling down flowers and shrubs and small trees in haste to reach the pavilion—where Aziza Nurmahal rose from her cushions and thrust the amber mouthpiece of her hubble-bubble which she was smoking into the hands of the nearest servant.

"Bismillah!" she exclaimed.

She was excited, expectant, her flaring, nervous nostrils quivering like those of a blooded mare.

To his dying day Hector Wade laughed at the memory of that scene.

For, when the visitor hove in sight, he saw that it was not a man, but a woman. Past the Biblical age she was, lean as a panther, haggard, berry brown. The cavernous mouth that shouted loud, guttural greetings of *"Salaam Aleikhoom! Salaam Aleikhoom! Yah Sidi! Yah Bibi! Yah Moslima!"* showed two lonely teeth crimson with betel juice; a few wisps of gray hair escaped from beneath the immense, mannish fur cap that tilted at a rakish angle over her left brow; her wizened body, clad in a robe of coquettish rose-madder silk sadly torn and mud blotched, was perched audaciously between the humps of the saturnine, Hebraic camel; on the hand that plied the rawhide twinkled an immense off-color diamond in a hammered lead setting.

"Down! Down on thy knees, O lust-scabbed spawn of a hyena and a bloated she-devil!" she addressed her mount that gave a wicked, grunting snarl, turned its swanlike neck with the evident intention of biting its rider's scrawny hip, bent its forelegs suddenly double

like a jack-knife, and shot the visitor neatly out of the saddle and directly at the feet of the princess who, between laughter and tears, picked her up and hugged her to her breast.

The older woman broke into a hectic torrent of speech; a mad mixture of extravagant terms of endearment—"Little pink-and-blue sweetmeat!" she called the princess, "little melon seed of delight! Little ivory moon of much sweetness! O thou soul of my soul! Thou blood of my liver!"—and bewailings of that cruel, stony Fate which had forced her, a woman of respectable years, respectable life, respectable ancestry, and virginal innocence, to leave the "fat and warm security of the harem, to launch myself upon the bitter, bitter waters of adventure and fatigue and extremely bad food, to cross the chilly mountain peaks of Afghanistan, to have rough, swine-fed Kabuli dogs crack low jokes to the detriment of my nose, to wrestle the many, weary miles with a stinking dromedary whose father was a wart and whose mother a most improper smell!"

"*Ahee—ahoo—ahai*—and ten thousand first-class devils!" she shrilled, giving herself a violent blow across her flat, heaving chest. "And all because of that great and most evil grandson of a cockroach, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, governor of the western marches!"

And she called the governor a name that reflected fully as much on her own morality and upbringing as on the other's female relatives.

On she raced in a mad, lashing jumble of words, while the servants, who saw Hector's amused astonish-

ment, told him that the woman was Aziza Nurmahal's old nurse, Ayesha Zemzem, a Bakhtiari hill woman from the western wilds; too, gave him a richly colored and extravagantly embroidered account of how the princess had raised her to the rank of regent, with the honorable title of *Zil-i-Sultana,* "Shadow of the Queen," and had afterwards reduced her to her former, humble position, because she had been in favor of granting "concessions" to the saheb-log.

Hector whistled.

"Concessions! Is *that* the rub in Tamerlanistan?" he thought.

For he was familiar, through the number of Anglo-Indians and Anglo-Chinese he had known in London, with that phase of chronic misunderstanding between the Orient and the Occident. He rather sympathized with the former and had always held that it is not altogether altruistic to "carry the white man's burden" with the help of cheap, stout native labor, cheaper raw material, and one hundred per cent yearly profits on every pound sterling invested.

He was not a business-man. Eton and the army had spoiled him for that. But, beneath all his other, at times slightly erratic and unexpected characteristics, he had a great deal of plain, straight English commonsense, and he decided that if, as it seemed, he was going to have a voice in the affairs of Tamerlanistan, he would think twice before he advocated the granting of any "concessions."

By this time Ayesha Zemzem had finished her tale, had been petted and scolded and wept and laughed over

by her mistress, and was now squatting in a corner of the pavilion, puffing noisily at a large, soothing hubble-bubble; and the princess dismissed her servants, turned to Hector, and told him what had happened in Tamerlanistan—what had sent the old nurse hurrying across desert and mountains.

It appeared that Wahab al-Shaitan, the negro executioner who, with the title of *Rawan-i-Sultana,* "Killer for the Queen," was regent during her absence, had done well, comparatively speaking. He had ruled with an iron hand and, at first, everybody had obeyed him.

Then, several weeks earlier, a spy had brought the news that Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, governor of the western marches, had again commenced intriguing with the Persian border ruffians whom he was supposed to keep in subjection. They were led by one Hajji Musa Al-Mutasim, a renegade Mecca Arab who had drifted east into Persia and was known, and unfavorably known, by the nickname of *Al-Ghadir,* "The Basin," because of his enormous appetite and corresponding bulk, which latter did not prevent him, followed by his wild borderers, from being a genius at frontier warfare. He was here to-day and there to-morrow, dancing out of the bush, striking swiftly and mercilessly, and always at the very place where he was not supposed to be; and when the villagers could not pay the tribute which he demanded, he gave their huts to the flames and carried off their women and children and cattle.

Too, he and his band were levying toll on the caravans that passed through the *Darb-i-Sultani,* "The

King's Highway," on which Tamerlanistan depended for a great deal of its foreign trade; and now it appeared that the governor, instead of using his soldiers and police against the raiders, was sharing in their enterprise, including the profits.

The regent had sent a summons to the governor to present himself immediately at the court of Tamerlanistan.

But Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, guessing, and rightly, that his arrival at court would be practically simultaneous with his beheading, had decided to do nothing of the kind, and had instead sent an insulting message, which said:

"I shall remain here and wax fat until thy mistress returns, O Wahab al-Shaitan.

"Then I shall proceed to the capital in state, followed by my armed men, and shall claim Aziza Nurmahal as my bride.

"For desire for her is in my nostrils. She is blooming and golden as the sun at dawn, with hair black as the midnight shades, with Paradise in her eyes, her bosom a white enchantment, her lips like the crimson asoka flower, and her lithe form swaying like the tamarisk when the soft wind blows sweetly, sweetly from the purple hills of Nijd.

"Let her be ready for my coming, and instruct Ayesha Zemzem, that toothless old hag, to have the bridal robe of emerald green—as the mantle of the blessed Prophet Mohammed, on whom Peace!

"For green is my favorite color, and in this, as in all other matters, I brook no master except my will."

It was the calm insolence, the serene brutality of the message which brought Hector up standing.

Not that he was the least bit in love with Aziza Nurmahal; for he loved Jane Warburton, and his in-

stincts were decidedly not polygamous. But he was one of those men in whom the rising tide of woman's demand for complete emancipation had not scotched that natural and decent impulse called chivalry—and let us say, in parenthesis, that this same instinct, when used by the wrong type of man, makes for licentiousness and domineering arrogance.

"Desire is in his nostrils, is it?" he exclaimed, "and he wants the bridal robe to be of green? Well"—he fingered the hilt of the ancient blade—"I'll see to it that there'll be another desire in his nostrils presently . . ."

"And he shall also long for another color!" shrilled the old nurse, coming out of her trance. "White! White! The calm white of the shroud when we stick his stinking corpse into an unhallowed grave! I like thee, Al Nakia! I like thee well, Son of the Swords!" and she jumped up and gave Hector a noisy smacking kiss.

The princess, too, was excited and happy.

"Thou art master henceforth, Al Nakia!" she said. "Thy orders shall be carried out."

Hector inclined his head. Here at last was what he had been yearning for—a chance at actions and deeds.

"Good!" he said. "We'll start for Tamerlanistan at once."

And, half an hour later, with the princess' servants forgetting for once their Oriental disregard of that vulgar western convention called Time, they were under way, after a short, vindictive, but decisive wrangle with the hairy, goatish-smelling Pathan guides

over rupees, annas, and pice, out of Peshawar, and up through the defile of the Khybar Pass where, on every hill-top, behind every rock and tree, squatted diminutive Goorkha soldiers in rifle green, guarding the bottle-like entrance of Britain's eastern Dominion.

Afghanistan—the North—Central Asia!

With every mile of the jagged road, Hector felt that this remote northern land was claiming him, welcoming him, rising about him in a stony, enormous tide which was trying to wipe from his brain all memory of home, of England, of the rolling, yellow Sussex downs.

Through the velvety gloom of the nights, through the crass white sunlight of the days, through the gaunt shadows of the volcanic hills which flanked the road and which danced, exuberantly, like hobgoblins among the dwarf aloes and pines and acacias, through the rhythmic *click-clacketty-click* of their Mawari stallions' dainty feet, there sounded to him the clarion call of a greater, deeper, older duty, duty more compelling than the mere "chance" at a new life, a new career which he had longed for ever since that night when he had shouldered his first brother's guilt and disgrace, when he had been kicked from the company of decent men as a card-cheat.

His groping, subconscious mind seemed on the very threshold of one of those splendid moments when, suddenly, a great light flashes down the hidden, choked passages of the soul, and makes visible for a fleeting second the secret yearnings of past lives—lives dimly remembered.

All this land—this far, northern land—was part of him.

He felt it, knew it.

And he was keyed up to a sort of grimly happy expectancy when Kabul jumped away from the coiling fogs of the hills, like a thick slab of opaque jade set into the frame of the sugarloaf-shaped mountains and incrusted here and there with rose pink and creamy yellow and crimson where the transplanted damask roses of Isfahan were making a brave fight against the chilly North.

They did not linger at Kabul, though the servants clamored for the warmth, not to mention the gossip and opium, of the bazaars.

Ishkashim was a shimmering maze of flat, white roofs; and they pulled into Balkh, silvery as lepers with the dust of the road, traded their horses for lean racing camels, which had a profusion of blue ribbons plaited into their bridles as a protection against the djinns and ghouls of the desert, filled their saddlebags with slabs of grayish, wheaten bread and little hard, golden apricots, and were off again, crossing the Great River at the shock of dawn, the princess at the head of the cavalcade, by Hector's side.

On!

North—then West!

Toward Tamerlanistan!

And, in the dusty, whirling wake of their camels' padded feet drifted whisper, gossip, babble, information; not as scientifically transmitted as the information which zums along the copper telegraph wires of

the Occident, but quite as reliable and to the point.

It started with a word of admiration in the servants' hall of the Tamerlani merchant who had entertained Aziza Nurmahal in Peshawar:

"A most proper man is Al Nakia, the princess' cousin. Strong and quick and courageous as the male elephant whose cheeks are streaked with passion. There is talk of trouble and mutiny in the western marches of Tamerlanistan, and Al Nakia has sworn a great oath on his blade that he will make the rebel governor eat seventy-seven times seventy-seven pecks of dirt! Such were his exact words!"

That night, one of the merchant's grooms repeated it to a nautch girl of his acquaintance in an opium shop near the Kashmere Gate, adding:

"Al Nakia has been long away from his own country. He has been in *Belait*—in Europe—and has become a Frank in everything, even as to his language. For I attended to his horse, and when he saw that the saddle girth had rubbed the stallion's back raw, I heard him talk English under his breath. 'Damn' he said—twice"—and he continued, with a certain haughty negligence—"I also know the language of the saheb-log. 'Damn—Hell—jolly corkin'!' I know a great deal."

All this the nautch girl retailed, an hour later, over a cup of brandy flavored with honey and rose water, to a Goorkha soldier who, the next morning, mounted guard in the Khybar Pass and told it to a friend of his, a rough Mahmoud tribesman with oily locks and a hawkish, predatory face.

Thus the tale took wings, spanning streams and

forests, vaulting crumbling basalt ridges and twisted mountain peaks, until, finally overtaking the princess' cavalcade and traveling well ahead of it, it reached the ear of Babu Bansi who, just then, was on the point of leaving Tamerlanistan and going to Bokhara to meet his eccentric employer, Mr. Preserved Higgins.

Bansi winked a large wink at nothing in particular.

"Al Nakia"—he said—"'The Expected!' Says 'Damn!' Is strong and quick and courageous! By Kartikeya Chaurya-Vidya, God of the Golden Spears! But this is jolly rippin' interesting!"

Whereupon he sent a cabalistic telegram to a mysterious address in Bokhara—a telegram which was opened by a Cockney millionaire who turned to the young, nervous Englishman with him with the words: "There's a whole lot o' blinkin' trouble in the wind; we got to go South straight orf!"; a telegram which caused the local manager of the Cable Company a fruitless and head-splitting searching through half-a-dozen cable code books—and told his body servant that he had changed his mind.

He was not going North, to Bokhara, but West, toward the Persian border.

"But, Babu-jee!" expostulated the servant, "the raiders are out in force, cutting purses—also throats; and the governor of the western marches is said to be in league with them, and . . ."

"Peace, O son of loathly begetting!" purred Bansi. "I was not born yesterday. I can hear the grass grow and the fleas cough!"

And he mounted his horse and, followed by the trembling servant, was off at a spanking pace and,

several days later, after many changes of horse, his fat body perspiring profusely, his eyes swollen and red with the dust of the road, but his brain as chillily cunning as ever, he pulled up at the headquarters of the governor of the western marches, who received him like a long-lost brother, just about the time that the princess and her party were drawing within sight of the capital of Tamerlanistan.

They had been riding hard; for, three times during the last days of the journey, messengers had come to them, sent by the executioner-regent, with words that the situation was growing worse, that even the capital was seething with subterranean rumors of rebellion. He had taken the precaution of putting Koom Khan and Gulabian in jail, besides cutting off a number of less important heads. His staunchest support was Nedjif Hassan Khan, the governor of the eastern marches, doubtless for the simple reason that the governor of the western marches was his twin brother and worst enemy.

But there was danger. Let the princess hurry.

And they had hurried.

Hector's camel was ready to give up. Her head was bowed on her heaving, lathering chest, and she breathed with a deep, rattling noise. But he bent over her neck, lifting her with every stride, and keeping her nose straight to the road.

Then, late one afternoon, the princess reined in and pointed.

"Tamerlanistan!" she said.

And they rode on again, while the camels grunted

and squealed, and while the dark mass that loomed up on the horizon was becoming more and more distinct with every minute, presently splitting into streets and houses; and a pleasant city it was beneath the rays of the dying sun; with carved, massive mosques and low, flat-roofed houses buried in flaunting gardens; with tall, keen-domed palaces, flushing scarlet and gold, gigantic water reservoirs, time-riven arches spanning crooked streets, square towers incrusted in high relief with figures of beast and man, and high above it all, descending in an avalanche of bold masonry, like a vision in a dream, the great palace of the Gengizkhani . . .

A noisy town. For, in the East, every one talks, and talks in extremes, either in a gloomy whisper or in a raucous scream, with the very voices of horse and camel and donkey seeming to be pitched in a soprano key; and high above the hubbub, just as the cavalcade passed through the East Gate, rose the melodious voice of a muezzin chanting the call to prayer from a minaret:

"Hie ye to devotion, O all ye faithful! Hie ye to salvation! God is most great!"—and the immediate, answering mutter, from balcony and shop, from coffee house and from the gutter itself:

"Here I am at Thy call, O Allah! Here I am at Thy call!"

"Here I am at Thy call!" echoed Aziza Nurmahal, softly, while Hector stared straight ahead.

"Tamerlanistan! The palace of the Gengizkhani!" he whispered, with an odd little catch in his throat;

and something like a shudder passed through him, something that touched the fringe of a forgotten mystery, ancient, magnificent, transcendent.

He had reined in his mount with his left hand while, instinctively, as if searching for encouragement, his right felt for the hilt of the blade—the blade that was responsible for all this twisted, mad adventure.

Then he shook off the dim, whirling thoughts. He spurred the camel's lean flanks.

On! By the side of Aziza Nurmahal who was smilingly returning the throaty salutations of the Tamerlanis who came running down the streets, out of houses and mosques and bazaars, to meet her: tradesmen and peasants and artisans; too, sabre-rattling, hook-nosed, swaggering nobles. And Hector noticed that many of the latter gave churlish greetings, and that some of them even stalked past, straight backed, insolently looking the other way, without a sign of recognition for their sovereign princess.

They continued their way through the main road of the city, and up a steep, stone-paved ascent that led to the *chowk,* the outer courtyard of the palace.

There they dismounted and walked, past files of soldiers and servants and courtiers, through a huge gate studded with brass spikes, through another courtyard crammed with human life, and into still another which was lifeless except for the whir and coo of hundreds of blue-winged pigeons.

The Princess drew a foot-long, skewer-like key from her waist shawl, opened the door, and motioned Hector to enter.

"Home!" she said, softly.

And, in the flash of an eyelid, the impression, rather the profound conviction, came to Hector that this strange, fantastic city was his Home indeed—his Home, every bit as much as the crumbling old Tudor Castle beyond the seas in smiling Sussex.

And he passed through the door, like a man sure of his way.

CHAPTER XII

In which it is proved that Eton, Oxford, and the Army are not necessarily fatal to success in life.

"Hansua ke biyah, khurpa ke git!" remarked Wahab al-Shaitan, the chief executioner, to Mahsud Hakki, the head eunuch, meaning by the gliding, purring words that it was "the wedding of the sickle, but that all the song was for the hoe"—an extravagant Oriental simile immediately understood by the other, who untucked his fat legs from beneath his fat haunches, rose, and stretched himself.

"Yes," he said. "It is Al Nakia who rules. It is Al Nakia who gives forth pearls of wisdom and justice and shining equity, judiciously tempered by the swish of the sword when it is red. It is Al Nakia whose eyes fatten the cattle and frighten the wolves. Yet is it Aziza Nurmahal whose praise is babbled in bazaar and mosque and mart. Al Nakia wants nothing except—he told me so himself when I asked him—the personal satisfaction of knowing that he is doing a measure of good, that he is achieving a measure of success. He said so—by Allah!"

A great, naïve wonder overspread Wahab al-Shaitan's plum-colored features.

"Last night," he said, a little hesitatingly, like a man who does not expect to be believed, "the princess

offered to raise him to the rank and title of *Itizad el-Dowleh,* 'Grandeur of the State,' since it is evident that Hajji Akhbar Khan will never return from the far places. But Al Nakia refused. He wants no higher title than his present one: *Sadr Azem,* 'Prime Minister.' Strange, isn't it?"

"Strange indeed. He *is* the government. He controls the finances, the palace household, and the army. He works like a beaver and sleeps like a hare. He is a deer in running, a tiger in pouncing, a hawk in clutching. And he does not intrigue for the throne. He does not ask the princess' hand in marriage. He does not even want money or fame. Strange—as strange as the ancient prophecy of the swords!"

And Mahsud Hakki shook his kinky poll.

Yet, had the two Nubians known or, knowing, been able to understand, the strangest aspect of the whole affair was less the actuality of Hector's success as *de-facto* ruler of Tamerlanistan than the contrast of this success with his, of course hypothetical, failure had Fate thrown him to a different corner of the earth.

For, had he taken his father's quite well-meant suggestion and gone to Canada or South Africa, he would by this time have become a remittance man, including all that the term implies—he would have been crushed beneath the wheels of that juggernaut like so many other of Britain's younger sons who leave home "for a reason."

But it is a racial, almost a historical, phenomenon that these same younger sons who go under in the far places colonized by their own countrymen, make

often supremely good when circumstance forces them to live and work amongst either inferior peoples, as in Africa, or a people of a different civilization and culture, as in Asia.

Perhaps it is because they feel that, amongst foreign races, it is up to them to uphold the traditions of their own country; perhaps there is at the back of it some scientific or quasi-scientific reason not yet discovered, dissected, and codified *ad absurdum* by those enthusiastically illogical and intolerant atheists who call themselves biologists.

But the fact of it remains; and Hector Wade was a living example.

Quite untrammeled by the clogging traditions of Tamerlanistan's past, yet careful not to rough-ride over any of those customs and prejudices which, in the swing of the centuries, had become endowed with an almost religious sanction, he gripped the helm of the ship of state and proceeded to navigate it amongst the swirls and shoals and eddies of the turbulent political waters.

Soberly English, he began with the department of the treasury. English, too, in his willingness to compromise instead of dragooning, he retransferred the treasury to the capable hands of Gulabian, whom he released from prison. English, finally, in his constructive though rather cynical belief that the best preventive against corruption is money, he raised the Armenian's salary to such a high figure that it would not have paid him to accept bribes. The result was as he had expected: Gulabian became a faithful sup-

porter of the new administration. Within a few weeks, the taxes were again commencing to flow in; not, of course, with the methodical regularity as during the life-time of the old Ameer and the stewardship of Hajji Akhbar Khan, but sufficiently smoothly to keep the country out of bankruptcy; and in this, as in the other administrative departments, it was the primitive simplicity of Tamerlanistan which permitted Hector to accomplish in a few weeks what, in a more hectic, a more highly organized, a more complicated European country, would have taken him as many months or years.

Next he turned his attention to the household, the palace. Many of the customs there went against his grain. But he said to himself that the Orient is the Orient, and that the harem, the intimacy of the house and family, is absolutely inviolable. Nor did he fancy himself in the rôle of a reformer. He was tolerant enough to admit that that which is right in London may well be wrong in Pekin, and *vice versa,* and so he attempted no changes in the household, with the single exception that he did away with the multitude of spies, telling tales about each other. Otherwise he left the intimate palace affairs in the hands of the old nurse.

When it came to the reform of the army, he not only used the military lessons he had learned in the Dragoons and at war college, but also the sober psychological wisdom—though he himself referred to it as horse sense—he had acquired through his human relations with the troopers in his half-squadron.

He remembered chiefly the case, including the

morals of the case, of one Bill Dockeray, a Liverpool wharfinger who had donned the blue and silver of the Dragoons in a moment of patriotism not altogether untainted by three fingers of gin which a pal had put in his fifteenth glass of beer—to regret his martial decision promptly and profanely as soon as he had discovered that the King's Shilling, a gay tunic, and the regimental band tuning up "The Dashing White Sergeant" were not all there was to life in barracks; that there was, also, drill and route marching and sobriety—*and* discipline.

Bill Dockeray had decided that he was a "free-born bloody Englishman," had emphasized this assertion by flattening out a lance-jack's aquiline nose, and had been sent to "clink" for three days.

Which had not chastened him in the least.

On the contrary, he had grown steadily worse, until the colonel had become bored with the monotonous, almost weekly:

"Private William Dockeray, C Squadron, two days for insubordination!" and, after a particularly mutinous outbreak had threatened him with brigade court-martial.

It was then that Hector Wade had interfered.

"Let me have a talk with Bill Dockeray," he had asked the colonel.

The latter had shaken his head.

"You'll never make a soldier out of him," he had said.

"It won't do any harm to try, sir."

"All right. Please yourself."

And Hector had gone to the guard-house and interviewed the lawless trooper.

"Look here," he had said, "you'll get jolly well kicked out of the service in disgrace."

"A fat bloomin' lot I'd care," had come the sneering reply.

"But you will also get two years' hard labor," Hector had continued—which put a different complexion altogether on the matter and made the argument much more persuasive.

"You're in for it," he had said, "either jail—or you behave yourself and stay with the colors. Why, man, the army isn't so bad. Of course you have to do what you are told. So have I. So has the colonel. So has everybody."

"I 'ytes the army," Bill Dockeray had insisted, stubbornly, aggressively.

"Take some interest in your work," Hector had replied. "Make the best of it. Why, there must be something about the service that you like. Let's see if we can find it between us."

And, after fifteen minutes' careful and tactful questioning, he had discovered that the lawless recruit took quite a little interest in farriery, his father having been a veterinary in the Midlands—with the ultimate result, that, half a year later, Private Bill Dockeray had become Farrier Sergeant William Dockeray, had been heard to speak about the honor of the "bloomin' old rag," meaning the Union Jack, with a great deal of proprietary pride, and had severely manhandled one Bert Simmonds, trooper, for having

said in canteen that all "them orf'cers are lousy, bleedin', cocky swine."

Now Hector used practically the identical tactics with regard to Koom Khan, the ex-commander-in-chief, whom Wahab al-Shaitan had put in jail during his term of office.

He visited him there and found him in decidedly bad humor. But he said to himself that this man who glared at him out of hasheesh reddened eyes without a word in answer to his courtly greeting, was an Oriental and, by the same token, a man hard to manage yet easy to inspire; a man, moreover, who preferred a certain subtle brutality to all the logic in the world and believed profoundly that casuistry was the final essence of ratiocination.

Wherefore he studied him as he might an exotic and nauseating beetle, not sure whether he should crush it under foot or simply ignore its existence, and said, ironically, with pauses between the words:

"Koom Khan, thou and I must either be friends—or enemies."

The other blinked his swollen eyelids and waved a negligent hand.

"Very well," he replied. "Let us be enemies, Al Nakia."

"Agreed." Hector rose and walked to the door. There he turned and added, quite gently, "But we shall not be enemies for long."

"For as long as there is breath in my body!" burst out Koom Khan.

"That is just what I meant when I said that it

would not be for long. For—I have never trusted a living enemy—and I have never feared a dead one!"

Koom Khan gave a slight start, but controlled himself almost immediately, and said, with the utmost, arrogant nonchalance:

"Death is not such a savory mouthful that one should gulp it down whole. I have changed my mind, my lord. I shall hereafter be thy friend."

And then, with a disconcertingly sudden swing to deep seriousness, he went on:

"Al Nakia! Fools—such fools as I—lose their way amongst the pitfalls of ambition. The pathway that is straight and clear is hidden to fools—such fools as I—by the mud of our greed, by the tangled undergrowth of our wayfaring desires. A handful of dust blinded my eyes to the signal whose meaning I know well."

"What signal?" asked Hector, rather embarrassed, and quite at a loss what to make of the other's almost tragic earnestness of gesture and expression.

"The prophecy, my lord! I set the flame of my sinful, foolish, greedy ambition against the words of the ancient prophecy! I forgot that thou, my lord, art the 'Expected One,' that thou camest out of the West, the blade in thy hand—the blade that will mate with the other blade, whenever the time is propitious and Allah gives the word!"

And Hector suppressed an impatient exclamation as, nearly automatically, he drew the sword from his waist shawl and tended it, hilt foremost, for Koom Khan to touch with his lips and swear fealty on, as

Tagi Khan had done that morning, and the Sheik-ul-Islam the day before.

"Of all the confounded, mystifying darned poppycock—I'll be jolly well blowed!" he said to himself, in plain, colloquial English, as he returned to his quarters in the left wing of the palace.

For in almost every instance when Hector, since he had begun to take charge of the affairs of Tamerlanistan, combining flattery and unvarnished brutality, brought the leaders and sub-leaders and henchmen of the different warring factions into line with his administrative policy, sooner or later the blades and the ancient prophecy were referred to, as the final argument.

And Hector was prey to natural curiosity. He wanted to know what it was all about.

But he did not dare.

At first his congenital stubbornness and, too, a certain fatalistic resolve to accept this new life of his and all it might bring without question or doubt or mental reservations, had sealed his lips. Now the very fact that he had accepted all without asking, that thus he had admitted indirectly that he was familiar with the prophecy and its meaning, made it impossible for him to demand an explanation.

What puzzled him most was that reference was always made to *two* blades.

He might have understood had they spoken of only one, the one he had found in the old lumber room near Dealle Castle; might have figured out that originally it had belonged to one of the Gengizkhani

family and that his bringing it here, back to Tamerlanistan, was considered a good omen by these superstitious people.

But—what was the other blade?

Too, who was this mad old Oriental in Coal Yard Street, near Drury Lane, who had lent him money on the sword and had sent him, indirectly, with that cryptic note to the house in the Colootallah where he had seen the princess?

Was he perhaps Hajji Akhbar Khan, the dead Ameer's prime minister, the *Itizad el-Dowleh,* of whom he heard whispers now and then, and who, shortly before his master's death, had gone to Europe on some secret mission?

And what then was the answer to it all?

How did this puzzle picture of twisted, painted, crazy Asian life dovetail into a whole?

For it *did* dovetail—to everybody's satisfaction, except his own. The very gipsies and donkey boys and beggars and dervishes seemed to accept it.

He would have asked Aziza Nurmahal. He trusted her implicitly, and liked her just as he would have liked some wholesome English "county" girl whose interests were entirely taken up with bringing baskets to the aged and ailing villagers, playing croquet on the curate's lawn, and going for a run with the harrier hounds, in short skirts and puttees.

Even if he had not been in love with Jane Warburton, Aziza Nurmahal would have had no sex appeal, no emotional message, for him.

He simply liked her. Liked her tremendously, and he would have asked her, as he might a pal:

"I say, tell me what all this drivel about swords and prophecies signifies—there's a dear!"

But the freedom and comradeship of the open road had ceased the moment she had set foot in the palace of the Gengizkhani, and once more she had become the Oriental princess, hedged in by ancient customs, submitting to the traditions of *purdah* and *harem,* of veil and woman's seclusion, putting aside the former only when she was surrounded by her servants and eunuchs, and never seeing him without palace officials and courtiers hovering about—*and* listening.

Thus Hector had never an opportunity of asking her, and found himself in the awkward and, from his straight-grained English point of view distasteful, predicament of forever playing a rôle, forever, silently, indirectly, admitting that he was perfectly familiar with a mystery of which in reality he hardly understood the outer fringes.

Tamerlanistan accepted him and though, naturally, amongst the older generation there were many who grumbled a little, who criticized, who compared him, of course unfavorably, with Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh,* the younger men praised the superior wisdom of the new prime minister, Al Nakia, the *Sadr Azem.*

He was not one of those cocksure Europeans and Americans who, delegated by circumstance to rule over Asiatics, decide immediately that all their traditions and customs are wrong and must therefore be promptly changed.

He knew that the thing which the Oriental dislikes

most in the European system is its dawdling, minute sloth in the manner of meting out justice. The Oriental holds that, when he is wronged, it is the business of the ruler or his executive delegate to right him at once, without delay, without expense, without wearying process of law, fully and finally. He appeals to his ruler loudly in the market-place, the mosque, or the hall of audience, expects that justice be dealt out then and there, that the decision may be inexorably, cruelly just, but must be reached irrespective of rules of evidence, precedent, customs or laws other than religious ones—and that all judgments must be made instantly executive and must under no conditions be subject to appeal.

So, as the princess' delegate, Hector held open court in front of the palace every morning, with Koom Khan and Gulabian as his advisers and often, when it came to settling domestic squabbles between husband and wife or master and servant, the old nurse contributing valuable, frequently profane, and always ruthlessly constructive counsel; and, in consequence, he was busy all day and half the night.

But he liked it. He forgot himself, his past work, his past disgrace and bitterness, in this work, and in the clean satisfaction of achieving which resulted from it.

The yellow wold of Sussex was forgotten.

All was forgotten except Jane Warburton.

In regard to the pacification and subjugation of the western marches, he progressed with the utmost slowness and caution, very much to the disappointment of

Koom Khan and Gulabian, the former advocating swift action for military, the latter for financial reasons.

Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, the governor, had not fulfilled his braggart threat, had not advanced to the capital at the head of his armed men to claim the hand of Aziza Nurmahal in marriage. On the other hand, he had declared his absolute independence, was now openly the ally of Hajji Musa Al-Mutasim, surnamed *Al-Ghadir,* "The Basin," the leader of the Persian border ruffians, and was levying ever-increasing toll on the caravans that went up the *Darb-i-Sultani,* "The King's Highway," with the argricultural produce of Tamerlanistan, to return with the wares of Persia, Bokhara, Khiva, and the Caucasus.

When the Sheik-ul-Islam, on a spiritual journey to Isfahan, was held up by the robbers and deprived of his sacerdotal green silk robe, his purse, and his rosary of flawless emeralds, with the ironically courtly words: "Take off that robe, O Certain Person, and remove the rosary. Also turn over thy purse. All three are wanted by the daughter of my maternal uncle!"; when, threatening the robbers with excommunication and similar dire theological consequences, he was answered with the insolent pun that religion was all very well for the *Ahl Hayt,* the Dwellers of Towns, but had no effect on the *Ahl Bayt,* the Dwellers of the Black Tents; when, on his return to the capital, he poured out the tale of his grievance and demanded that a punitive expedition be sent immediately to the western marches, Hector cut the lamentations short by

saying that he himself was the *siper salar,* the captain general, and that the interference of the church in matters military was his pet dislike.

"But, Al Nakia," protested the Sheik-ul-Islam, "be pleased to consider my losses."

"A new robe of state shall be given thee, also some money, and a rosary . . ."

"Of emeralds—like the one I lost?" came the quick, greedy query.

"No. God hears prayers even though they be clicked on simple wooden beads."

"But my loss of dignity, my lord! My loss of prestige!"

Hector smiled sardonically. From the very first, he had felt an antipathy for the suave, hypocritical priest.

"Worldly thoughts for a holy man," he suggested; and when the other again spoke about his loss of dignity and, with a general appeal to the courtiers who crowded the hall of audience, repeated his demand that an expedition be sent to punish Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, Hector burst forth with a thunderous "Silence! I follow my own counsel, even though the robbers cut off the nose of the Commander of the Faithful himself."

The Sheik-ul-Islam rose and walked away, angry, mortified, throwing over his shoulder the Parthian shot that Al Nakia was setting up to be a warrior, a fighter, a swashbuckler, a leader of men, but that "the more we approach the enemy, the more the tiger in our heart becomes a lamb!"

"Thou hast made an enemy of the priest," said Koom Khan to Hector, that night, as the two, in the company of the Armenian treasurer, were smoking peaceful hubble-bubbles on the balcony of the palace, looking out into the spring night where fire starlight drifted through budding boughs into budding earth.

Hector made a negligent gesture, while the other continued that, too, there was some truth in what the Sheik had said:

"The army is ready, is eager to fight. Let us strike, Al Nakia."

And Gulabian, though an Armenian and thus, congenitally, a man of peace, agreed to it and advocated a quick, smashing attack on the governor of the western marches. He went on to say that, through the good offices of spies and also of the local agent of the Cable Company, the Babu Chandra, who had intercepted and deciphered several cable messages sent from India, via Tamerlanistan, to Isfahan, and thence to the headquarters of the rebel chief, he had found out that the latter was preparing a great military coup, for which he had not only the support of the renegade Arab, Musa Al-Mutasim, but also of certain Europeans who seemed to have enough influence with the British-Indian government to have been granted a permit to ship rifles and ammunition in large quantities through the Persian Gulf.

"England takes no interest in the affairs of Tamerlanistan," continued Hector. "It is outside their sphere of interests."

"Yet the fact remains. The rifles are being shipped."

"But who are the Europeans with Abderrahman Yahiah Khan? And what have they to do with this land?"

"Everything. For remember, there is the old question of the 'concessions,' and one of the Europeans—his name is Mr. Preserved Higgins . . ."

Hector sat up straight. "Preserved Higgins?"

He thought, puzzled. Why, he said to himself as he had done once before, it was this same Cockney millionaire who had been the first to mention the name of Tamerlanistan to him, who had wanted him to go there, who had spoken of the princess, of Aziza Nurmahal, and . . .

"My lord," Gulabian's terse, low voice cut through his thoughts, "Mr. Preserved Higgins is a careful man. He holds to the ancient maxim that among the sages, Narudu; among the beasts, the jackal; among the birds, the crow; among men, the barber; and among wise men, he who thinks twice—is the most crafty. Thinks twice! Acts twice! Thus he is also shipping rifles and ammunition from Bokhara and Khiva and Russian Turkestan, in case an enemy whisper a word into the ears of the British-Indian Raj. Too, there is the other European whom he brought with him, and my spies tell me that he is a soldier like thyself, trained in the art of war, quick and energetic and courageous. Nor is that all. For—thou knowest the old prophecy—of the sword and the wooing of the swords . . . ?"

"Yes. Of course," said Hector, blushing slightly for the white lie. "What about it?"

"The governor of the western marches is spreading the news that thou art not the man meant in the prophecy, that thou art an impostor, that the other, the Englishman whom Mr. Preserved Higgins brought with him, is the real Al Nakia, the real 'Expected One,' and . . ."

"Then Mr. Preserved Higgins knows of the prophecy?" sharply demanded Hector.

"Yes. He knows it through his agent, the Babu Bansi."

Hector was about to accept the explanation, when, suddenly, looking up and seeing the expression of sardonic amusement that flitted over Koom Khan's vulpine features, he remembered that this was Tamerlanistan, the heart of the Moslem Orient, and that the Moslems, as a religious body, have that strange characteristic which the Chinese have racially; namely, an unwritten, uncodified, but absolutely compelling freemasonry which makes it possible that a secret known to all the Moslems of the community, from the highest dignitary of the mosque *olema* to the lowest, raggedest donkey boy, from the head of the *Rakaiz Al-'Utab,* the "Merchants' Guild," to a recently and forcefully converted plum-colored Nubian slave, that a secret which is whispered in the coffee-houses, the opium shops, the palace yards, the camel markets, the caravanserais, and behind the flopping curtains of the harem, remains a sealed book to the non-Moslem members of the community. He knew that it was this peculiar characteristic which, next to the centripetal

influence of the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina, is the power which holds Islam together and which, in spite of the many races which compose it, makes of Islam a fighting, thinking, to-be-reckoned-with whole.

The only exception to this freemasonic rule of secrecy is made in the case of a non-Moslem whose advice and help is absolutely essential and who has become an integral part of the community, and that was why Gulabian, though an Armenian and a Christian, but a member of the intimate palace household and of the late Ameer's cabinet, would have heard about the prophecy of the blades.

But Babu Bansi was a Hindu, an infidel—and an outsider, working for outside interests.

How then had the man found out?

And Hector voiced the question.

"How did Bansi find out?" he demanded.

Thus interrogated, the Armenian seemed horribly startled and confused, while Koom Khan broke into raucous, disagreeable laughter—laughter presently echoed in a cracked falsetto from the room in back of the balcony whence Ayesha Zemzem, the old nurse, stepped out with a clanking of brass anklets and a low, ironic salaam to Gulabian, who was momentarily becoming more unhappy.

"Al Nakia," she said, "there are three things the effects of which upon himself no man can foretell—namely, desire of woman, the dice box, and the drinking of ardent spirits—"

"And," gently cooed Koom Khan, with a glance at

the uneasy Armenian, "our Gulabian likes not the dice box, being a man faithfully mated to his swollen purse, and sacrificing daily to the swag-bellied god of compound interest. Nor does he care for ardent spirits, being in that respect—and in that respect only!—like a True Believer. But—*ahee!*—the desire of woman smells sweetly, pungently, intoxicatingly in his nostrils!"

"Indeed!" the old nurse took up the tale. "The desire of woman! Our Gulabian knows not the truth of the saying that the beauty of the nightingale is its song, science the beauty of an ugly man, forgiveness the beauty of a devotee, and the beauty of a decent man steadfastness in love. Shameless dancing girls from the stinking, yellow Southland—bold-eyed, red-haired hussies from Georgia and the Caucasus—raven-locked maidens from Bokhara—in a never-ending procession, they dance across the heart of our Gulabian. They sweep with perfumed fingers the impetuous harp strings of his soul. And," she went on mercilessly, while the Armenian stammered and blushed, while Koom Khan guffawed crudely, and even Hector, for all his preoccupation, joined in the merriment, "there was talk, at the time of the Ameer's death, of one Jayashri, a golden-skinned beauty from far Bengal. 'Sister,' the Babu Bansi called her—but a naughty sister she was, finding but little joy in sisterly devotion, in minding her fat and indecent brother's household pots, but instead whispering words of sweetness and love and soft passion into the ear of our . . ."

"Peace, Leaky-Tongue!" cut in the Armenian, thor-

oughly exasperated. "Peace, Parrot-Face! I admit it. Jayashri's beauty was overpowering—as the moon's on the fourteenth day. Her little, white feet were lisping twin flowers, her little nose was . . ."

"Spare us the enumeration of her physical perfections," laughed Hector. Then, seriously: "Thou didst tell her?"

"Yes. A word or two about the prophecy of the blades. She said that true love means utter trust, utter confidence, and so just a word or two I told her, my lord!"

"But sufficient to give a clue to her—brother, the Babu!"

"Enough, too," croaked the old nurse, "to throw this land into turmoil, to cause the Babu Bansi to send messages along the devil wires to *Belait*—to Europe—and then to smash the devil machinery, so that the other son of a noseless mother, the Babu Chandra, stalks into the presence of Aziza Nurmahal and speaks words bloated with arrogance! Yes! Thou didst tell her enough, O Armenian, to plant the seeds of rebellion in this land—"

And she gave a terse and vituperative history of the events that had disturbed the peace of Tamerlanistan, just about the time of the memorable card game at Dealle Castle when Hector had lived up to the traditions of the Wade family and had shouldered the guilt of his elder brother . . . the memory came to him now, and with it a slight bitterness, too, a slight elation.

For, after all, he said to himself, if it had not been for the card scandal, for the Wade traditions, he

would still be in England, living an entirely honorable and entirely innocuous life as a subaltern of Dragoons, while here he was standing on his own feet—independent—and . . .

He shut off his rambling thoughts and turned to Ayesha Zemzem who was still emptying the vials of her abuse on the head of Gulabian, to the accompaniment of Koom Khan's rumbling laughter.

"Enough!" Hector raised an impatient hand. "The harm is done. Mr. Preserved Higgins knows of the prophecy, knows enough of it at least to turn it to his advantage, and he will doubtless try and force our hands in the matter of the 'concessions.' All right. We'll make the best of a bad bargain."

"A very bad bargain," commented Koom Khan, with a sidelong glance at the treasurer.

The latter smiled.

"Fight poison with poison," he suggested. "The Babu Chandra, too, represents European interests. If thou, O Al Nakia, sayest the word . . ."

"I know. If I say the word, the sahebs who employ the Babu Chandra will some to my support with money and rifles and ammunition—but they, too, will demand 'concessions.' No—there is no choice between the Devil and Satan. No 'concessions' shall be granted until we—the princess and I—have thoroughly considered the matter from every angle. I do not trust the sahebs."

"And thou a saheb thyself!" softly said the Armenian.

"Thus so much better able to judge the strength—*and* the weaknesses of the saheb-log!"

"But remember!" argued Koom Khan. "Abderrahman Yahiah Khan is spreading the tale that thou art an impostor—that the Englishman whom Higgins saheb has brought is the true 'Expected One!'"

Again Hector played up to his rôle, which by this time had become second nature to him. He drew the ancient sword from its sheath with a dramatic flourish.

"Here is the proof that I am the 'Expected One!'" he said.

"Proof enough for us," rejoined Koom Khan. "But—thou knowest how it is. The masses, the people, are like sheep. If the governor of the western marches, with the help of Higgins saheb's money bags and the unknown saheb's war prowess, should make a sudden descent upon us and snatch victory out of our fingers, then, before we shall be able to rally for a counter-stroke, the masses will swing to him. They will say that, blade or no blade, thou art an impostor. And then"—he shrugged his massive shoulders—"I love thee well, my lord—I would not care to see the little, little jackals gorge themselves on thy bleeding, headless trunk—"

"Nor shalt thou see it," replied Hector. "I tell thee I have considered everything. When I fight Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, I shall fight him on ground of my own choosing, and not on ground of his choosing!"—and he whispered certain instructions to Koom Khan, which sent the latter to his headquarters with a chuckle and the parting words that Al Nakia was in-

deed a warrior amongst the warriors, swift as a snake, keen as a tiger, and shrewd as a bull elephant in spring.

The Armenian's final plea that the country needed the safety of the western road, that the caravan men were afraid of robbers, that traffic with Persia, Khiva, and Bokhara had practically stopped and with it the tax receipts, Hector dismissed by asking the other to develop the eastern trade.

"There is Afghanistan," he said, "and India, both ready to buy our produce, and a good road leads there, the *Darb-al-Sharki,* 'The Eastern Highway,' and our kafilas can trade there as easily and as profitably as they used to with Persia. All that is needed is a little pluck, a little persistency, and a great deal of initiative —and I rely on thee, friend Gulabian, to supply all three!"—a broad flattery which fully served its purpose and sent the Armenian on his way, as pleased with Hector as Koom Khan had been.

"A clever man is Al Nakia," the old nurse said that night to Aziza Nurmahal. "He does not draw the sword of foolish audacity, nor does he throw away the scabbard of precaution, and it has indeed been said by a very wise man that the brain, not the body, is the proof of love. The body? The face? By the red pig's bristles!—am I a fool or a moon-sick virgin of thirteen to call a thing made up of impure matter a face, to drink its charms as a drunkard swallows the ardent liquor from his cup? Not that Al Nakia is ugly. For there is a hidden fire of passion in his eyes that promises—ah!—promises!"

"Hai—hai—hai!" exclaimed the princess, her words choked with gurgling, irrepressible laughter. "By the Prophet—art thou then in love with Al Nakia, old woman? Why—when thou speakest of him, thy eyes roll about like the tail of the water-wagtail, thy shriveled old lips pout to resemble ripe pomegranates, thy ancient, flat bosom heaves like the lotus-bud awakening to the winds of spring. Truly, Al Nakia will feel flattered when he hears that the happiness of all thy desires and the desires of all thy happiness are concentrated in the touch of his hand, the touch of his lips!"

"I am thinking of thee, Little Dream by the Gift of Thy Face," gently rejoined the nurse, "and not of myself. What has an old witch like myself to do with love—what can a pig do with a rose bottle? But thou and he should mate, Little Moon of Fulfillment, thus finishing the old prophecy—the wooing of swords!"

Aziza Nurmahal shook her head.

"I like him well," she said softly, "but I do not love him. Love is a question—but one cannot force the answer to it. Love is a lampless pilgrim, wandering through the black night—and looking for the moon-rays that never come. Love is a drifting in the stream of vague, sweet things—a stretching of longing arms at the shadowy fringe of the never-to-be!"

"Melancholy thoughts for the heart of a babe," said Ayesha Zemzem.

And, like many another girl, before and since, East and West, the princess whispered, with a distinct note of not at all distressing self-pity:

"I shall never love anybody!"

A statement which, at least subconsciously, she withdrew three days later, when walking through the Bazaar of the Goldsmiths, followed by a retinue of servants and eunuchs, her little face more disclosed than hidden by the diaphanous veil that covered her features from the soft curve of her chin to the tip of her nose, her lithe young body robed in the mysteriously feminine folds of a rose-red *sari* embroidered with tiny seed pearls, she saw a lean, hawkish, black-eyed stranger standing there, dressed in the costume of a rich Persian gentleman; evidently a sightseer, a traveler, for he was watching the shifting crowd interestedly.

He saw her and stared—frankly, rudely stared. But Aziza Nurmahal smiled, with all the shrewd demureness of her girlhood and with all the ancient wisdom of her sex, as she heard Mahsud Hakki, the head eunuch, make grumbling complaint that these were Persian manners, the manners of bad Moslems, of swine-fed heretics and similar base-born cattle, to ogle women in the bazaars and market-places.

That night, pledging her to secrecy by the gift of a handful of gold coins and half-a-dozen silk *saris,* she instructed Kumar Zaida, a pert little Tajik slave girl whose love affairs were the scandal of the whole palace, to make the rounds of the caravanserais and to find out the name of the Persian stranger:

"A lean man, with high cheek bones, an aquiline nose, clean-shaven, dressed in a scarlet silk *khalat,* a white Persian lamb cap on his head. He carries his

cartridge belt in the Circassian manner, from right shoulder to left hip;" which was a remarkably faithful description, chiefly considering that she had only seen him in the fleeting fraction of a second!

And when the next day Zaida reported that the stranger had left town to return to his own country, and that in spite of all warnings he had taken the western highway which was infested with the robbers of Abderrahman Yahiah Khan and "The Basin," Aziza Nurmahal's heart felt heavy within her, and her fingers wandered aimlessly over the strings of her *rubabah,* her Persian guitar.

The stranger, meanwhile, was spurring his Balkh stallion up the western highway, beneath the purple depths of the night sky where hung tiny points of light that glittered and glistened with the cold gleam of diamonds.

"That Babu factotum of Mr. Preserved Higgins knows a jolly lot about Tamerlanistan," he said to himself, whimsically, "but he does not know the most important thing. He does not know that the little princess has the blackest eyes in all the world. The wooing of swords? The fulfilling of the old prophecy? All right—'Barkis is willin' '—now more than ever!"

And he kept on toward the west, where a faint, silver gray mountain was flung like a cloud against the sky. All night he rode, and through the soft spring morning that dropped over the land with a brocaded mantle of rose and gold, down the *Darb-i-Sultani* that was flanked by huge piles of bare rock, standing detached upon the surface of sand and clay

. . . an immense expanse of land, a scalped, flayed wilderness where, to use the Arab saying, there lived nobody but Allah. Yet a land that had once been a granary, that had once been green with wheat and yellow with pulse, that had once fed hundreds of thousands—and that would again bear fruit, given irrigation, development, the granting of—"concessions."

And it was of "concessions" that, three days later, the stranger talked to Mr. Preserved Higgins, who was stretched at ease beneath the silken dome of Abderrahman Yahiah Khan's tent of state, the Babu Bansi squatting at his feet and looking up at the eccentric Cockney millionaire with adoring eyes.

CHAPTER XIII

In which there is intrigue right and left and in the middle and down the spine, and in which, furthermore, the iron enters the buffalo's soul.

"It's agreed, eh?" Mr. Preserved Higgins asked the stranger. "You're on, wot? Cop the gal, cop the swag, cop the 'ole plurry country—and then a bit o' signed pyper givin' me the right to . . ."

"Yes, yes." The stranger, *alias* The Honorable Tollemache Wade, inclined his head. "As soon as I am—oh—what d'you call it?"

"Ameer of Tamerlanistan," gently suggested Bansi.

"Thanks, old chap. As soon as I am Ameer, I shall give you the 'concession' you want. That was our agreement."

"Right-oh!" Mr. Preserved Higgins smiled into his curly, russet-colored beard. "And you won't regret it, nor will Tamerlanistan. I ain't tryin' to deny that I'm goin' to myke a stiff bit o' the ready on my investment. But—live and let live is my motto, and I tells you the country ain't goin' to lose. Them Tamerlanis are goin' to 'ave so much tin, Rolls-Royces are goin' to be as plentiful 'ereabouts as vultures are now. I'm goin' to play fair, sonny, see?"

And Mr. Preserved Higgins meant it. For he was characterized by a peculiar honesty in dishonesty.

Money to him was not alone the greatest power—which doubtless it is—but also the greatest aim in life. He had never really moved very far away from the plastic first-times of his infancy in the reeking, gray-blotched London slums where the possession of an extra sixpence had spelled an extra pint of half-and-half and an extra pound of chuck-steak; and, by developing the waste lands and digging into the untouched mineral resources of Tamerlanistan, while primarily interested in his own pocket-book, he fully intended giving to the native Tamerlanis the Oriental equivalent for the extra pint of half-and-half and the extra pound of meat.

Beyond this primitive factor he could not see; and if anybody had told him that in Central Asia, in a land which partly deliberately and partly through a self-protective instinct prefers a simple civilization to the hectic, pinchbeck civilization of the Occident that is nine-tenths mechanical, money is the outer husk, not the inner kernel of life, he would have consigned the speaker to an unmentionable place.

"Bloody cyreful lad, that's wot you are," he continued. "'Ad to 'ave a look at the gal first, didn't you? Well, there ain't no 'arm done. Seemed to 'ave liked the looks of 'er?"

"I did," smiled Tollemache.

"Wot else did you find out at the capital?"

"Not much. The army seems to be in good training, but, from all I heard, they can't get ammunition."

"That's my old pal Rivet-Carnac's fine 'and," Mr. Preserved Higgins interjected. "'E does a few

things besides countersignin' passports. Well—we'll be ready three months from to-d'y, and Al Nakia ain't goin' to 'ave a permit for as much as the importytion of a second-'and machine-gun—not 'e!"

"But he has something else, Higgins," said Tollemache.

"Wot?"

"The confidence and trust of the people."

"Blast the people!"

"I tell you the old troublemakers, even Koom Khan and Gulabian, are with him."

"They won't be after you win jolly bloody victory and make jolly old sizzlin' entrance as the 'Expected One,' saheb," said the Babu.

"Correct," the Cockney agreed. "You just give us one victory, as we're sure to 'ave, and then we'll spring the news on them benighted 'eathens that you're the real cheese, and that the other guy ain't nothin' but a smelly bit o' Cheddar rind. You just w'yt. Glad you took my advice and kept aw'y from the palace"—he added—"damned glad."

He heaved a sigh of relief.

For, shortly after their arrival at Abderrahman Yahiah Khan's headquarters following Bansi's telegram that Al Nakia was on his way to Tamerlanistan, the millionaire had put his cards—most of them—on the table. He had spoken to Tollemache Wade of the ancient prophecy of the swords and had suggested a deal by the terms of which Tamerlanistan should be conquered, Tollemache should marry the princess Aziza Nurmahal and then, to repay his obligations to Mr. Preserved Higgins, grant the Anglo-American

corporation of which the latter was the head, certain extensive land development concessions.

But Tollemache had shaken his head.

"I won't marry the girl until I have at least seen her," he had said.

"Heaven-Born," the Babu, who had been present at the interview, had exclaimed, "she is like the moon on the fourteenth day! She is a precious casket filled with the arts of coquetry! She is . . ."

"I don't trust your taste in feminine beauty, dear boy," Tollemache had smiled; and when Mr. Preserved Higgins had made some sardonic remarks to the effect that, judging from his experiences with Gwendolyn de Vere, Tollemache could do worse than accept somebody else's opinions in affairs of the heart, the younger man had replied that this was just the reason why he was going to be doubly careful in the future.

"I am going to take a look at her," he had repeated, stubbornly.

"Impossible!" Mr. Higgins had exclaimed, afraid that Tollemache, if he went to Tamerlanistan, might see his brother and recognize him.

"Impossible—rot! I speak Persian like a native. I can easily go to the capital, see the princess—somehow—and incidentally find out a few things about the military situation."

Finally, after he had raged and threatened for half an hour, but had found Tollemache obdurate, Mr. Preserved Higgins had agreed. But he had made Tollemache promise that, under no conditions, would

he go near the palace or in any other way put himself in a position where Al Nakia might see him.

"For," he had said, mixing truth and lies, "Al Nakia is an Englishman, doubtless an officer—and mebbe 'e knows you and might recognize you—and then the jig'll be bloomin' well up—see?"

And so now Mr. Preserved Higgins felt relieved, and it was with a great deal of zest that he devoted the following days to preparations for the coming attack against Tamerlanistan. Though not a military man, his advice was sane and constructive. For he had fought many a battle in the shrill arena of finance, and there is a great deal of similarity between the mind which uses the massed battalions of coined gold and the mind which uses bullets and guns and human flesh and blood.

In either case, strategy counts fully as much as brute force. Strategy, patience, ability to wait, to sit tight, to take punishment—and in this respect Mr. Preserved Higgins, in the western marches, was playing practically the same game which Hector Wade was playing in the capital.

"We ain't in no 'urry," the Cockney said. "We want to win this 'ere war, and we don't want nothin' to miscarry. I'd rather 'ave that Al Nakia blighter attack us 'ere, where we knows the ground, than attack 'im on 'is own ground."

"I assure you they are short of ammunition," insisted Tollemache.

"Mebbe. That's just why we should w'yt till we 'ave a surplus of ammunition."

And he carried his opinions against that of Tollemache who was anxious to see again the little princess' black, hooded eyes, and against that of Abderrahman Yahiah Khan and "The Basin" whose appetite for the rich loot of Tamerlanistan was increasing with each passing day; and he went ahead with his careful, methodical preparations until, nearly a week later, a great wave of excitement surged through the camp of the rebels.

It began with the Arab gunner, a deserter from the Turkish army who was presiding over the destinies of the machine gun that protected the silken tents of the leaders, suddenly shading his eyes, looking steadily down the *Darb-i-Sultani,* then bending feverishly to his weapon, working the screw-levers with brown, nimble fingers and sliding the gun so that the ugly, blunt muzzle pointed due east, with a wicked, snapping recoil, like a beast of prey sniffing for blood.

Tollemache Wade happened to be passing.

"What's up, Mehmet?" he asked.

The Arab pointed—and gave a shrill, throaty yell of warning which electrified the camp into instant action.

Arabs and Persians and rebel Tamerlanis and riff-raff of all Asia that had joined Abderrahman Yahiah Khan came tumbling out of tents and huts, strapping on carbines and revolvers, swords and daggers as they ran . . . with a babel of cries, in soft, purring Persian, in limpid Turkish, in virile, guttural Arabic and high-pitched Tartar . . .

"Zid! Zid! Yah Ullah!"—

"Ikhs ya'l khammar—O thou drunkard!" ludicrously to a frenzied, plunging stallion—

"Allahu—Allahu!"—

"Bismillah irrahmân errahmîn!"—and, clear above the turmoil, Mr. Preserved Higgins' nasal, twangy "I say—wot the 'ell's up?", then, to a frantic Nubian: "Get off my feet, you bleedin' swine!", blending fantastically, ridiculously with Abderrahman Yahiah Khan's full-flavored curses as he pushed his way through the crowd with fist and elbow.

"Give way—give way there!"

The governor reached the side of the gunner who, tense, quivering, was still bending over his weapon, drawing a bead straight toward the east, while the soldiers, under Tollemache Wade's sharp commands, were deploying in a half circle, rifles ready for the "Fire!"

By this time Mr. Preserved Higgins, too, had reached the gunner's side.

He looked.

Far in the east, a blast of sirocco wind filled with stabbing, biting particles of desert sand had whirled up on the feathery sky line. A mass of violet-red nimbus, furrowed horizontally by a thin, wavery gray line of mist cloud, and nicked with gold and yellow, as of the sun mirroring on polished weapons, rolled down, steadily gathering momentum.

There was a savage humming and zumming and roaring. Too, sudden, grimly staccato noises—like steel clanking against steel—swords—lance butts—

"War!" Musa Al-Mutasim came running up with great speed, in spite of his huge, amorphous bulk,

rifle in hand. "Al Nakia's men—they're attacking us!"

"Yes!" Mr. Preserved Higgins turned on Tollemache. "You are a silly plurry ass, aren't you? Told me, didn't you, they was unprepared? My word—of all the . . ."

"Keep your hair on!" advised Tollemache. "If these are Al Nakia's soldiers, our spies and scouts would have brought us warning."

"They may have been overpowered, saheb," suggested "The Basin." "Look—look!"

For the cloud grew. Rolling on as mercilessly as Fate, it seemed to spread, to jump into a pattern, brown and black, blotched with white and vivid scarlet. The roaring and zumming increased—

A faint neighing of horses. A tinkling of camels' bells. A thumping of kettle-drums.

Then a flash of lance points and sword blades and metal-bossed arm shields. Shrill cries. The portentous thunder of galloping horses. The soft, rhythmic thud of the dromedaries' padded feet.

Tollemache jerked aside the arm of the Arab gunner who was just about to swing the machine-gun on its swivel and rake the oncoming horde with shot. "Stop it!" he cried; and, to his captains who shouted the order down the deployed lines:

"Hold your fire—hold your fire!"—and he despatched a messenger to a camp beyond the main camp where the few pieces of artillery which Mr. Preserved Higgins had shipped through from the Persian Gulf were served by specially trained men.

"Wot the 'ell are you w'ytin' for?" cried the

Cockney, who was nearly hysterical by this time. "Go on—give the order to fire—or . . ."

"Shut up, you little fool!" Tollemache took him by the collar and shook him. "If they are enemies, I am going to hold my fire until the very last moment. And if they are not enemies . . ."

"I tell you they are!"

"I am not sure. They wouldn't be such fools as to attack us in mass formation—not if, as you say, Al Nakia used to be in the service . . ."

And then, quite suddenly, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan raised a hairy, brown hand.

"Listen!" he said. "The saheb is right. These are not enemies. They are friends!"

And, through the sudden, dense silence, out of the mass of people on horse and camel back into which the oncoming cloud had steadily crystallized, a voice drifted forth:

"*Marhaba Bik! Yah—Marhaba Bik!*—Greetings! Greetings!"

The throaty shout tore clear from the gathering rush. A lonely rider detached himself. At full speed he galloped up, a white flag jerking crazily from the point of his long, tufted bamboo lance; and, a moment later, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan recognized him:

"Koom Khan! Koom Khan!"

"Salaam! A thousand salaams—and one—and yet another one!" replied the other, wheeling his horse so suddenly that it fell on its haunches and slid, squatting, through the soft sand. The next moment he was on his feet and ran the rest of the distance, his dyed beard

waving across his shoulder like a crimson flag, and he knelt down in front of the astonished governor of the western marches, hands outspread, forehead touching the dust in sign of supplication.

"I demand protection, my lord!" he implored. "Protection for myself, for the Sheik-ul-Islam"—indicating the priest who had ridden up—"and for my people—my women and children and slaves!"

"Protection against whom?" demanded the other.

"Against Al Nakia!"

And the next moment, according to the ancient Moslem ceremonial, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan pressed Koom Khan to his stout breast, murmuring piously:

"*Nahnu malihin*—we shall eat salt together!", while "The Basin," in answer to Mr. Preserved Higgins' whispered suspicion that he did not trust Koom Khan, that perhaps treachery was in the wind, replied that No!—if Koom Khan intended treachery, he would not have been such a fool as to bring his women and slaves and servants and children with him.

And he had.

For, by this time, the rest of the cavalcade had come up and it turned out to be composed of several hundred people, on foot, on horseback, on dromedaries, the servants armed with lances and rifles and metal-bossed shields. But there were many women and children, some mounted behind slaves or astride the large, green painted boxes of the pack animals; a few, doubtless women of high degree, in gaudy, tinsely *takht-rawan* litters carried by slaves.

Yes—Mr. Preserved Higgins admitted—here was a

sure sign that Koom Khan and the Sheik-ul-Islam had come as friends, bringing peace.

Too, there was no doubt whatsoever about the priest's sincerity as, late that night, with the Babu Bansi playing as dragoman, he poured the tale of his grievances into the, if not sympathetic, then at least interested, ears of the eccentric millionaire, telling him how Hector Wade had treated him with contumely and ridicule, making him, a priest, a holy man, a Sheik of the Faith, a doctor of Koranic law, a famous compiler of many learned commentaries on Moslem theology, a laughing-stock before the courtiers and palace slaves.

"Al Nakia is a pig," he wound up, "with a pig's heart. So was his father a pig before him, and his grandfather before his father."

A statement in which, after the Babu had translated it, Mr. Preserved Higgins concurred heartily.

"Right-oh!" he replied. "Can't myke it too strong for me, cocky. I was born orf Soho, and I don't like that there Al Nakia bird any more than you do!"—and he clapped the Sheik-ul-Islam familiarly on the shoulder.

The latter could not understand a word of English, but he read in the Cockney's small, blinking eyes that there was no difference of opinion here about the physical and spiritual characteristics of the *de facto* ruler of Tamerlanistan, and so he added, as a happy afterthought, that he personally—and Allah was his witness that he was a decent and mild man, not given to vituperation—considered Al Nakia hyena spawn

without faith or morals or manners—except bad manners!

"Go right ahead, sonny!" encouraged the Cockney. "Shoot off that ugly mouth o' yours. Call 'im bad nymes, if it 'elps your liver any. But"—turning to the Babu—"tell 'is nibs when 'e's through with 'is nytive Billingsgyte about that Al Nakia blighter, that I'd like to talk business to 'im."

"Business—see?" he addressed the Sheik-ul-Islam direct, making that gesture with thumb and index finger which stands for money the world over, and the other smiled and wagged his carefully curled beard.

And so they did talk business, very much to both gentlemen's satisfaction, while, in a neighboring tent, Koom Khan was entertaining the governor of the western marches with a similar tale of Hector's shortcomings, winding up softly, ingenuously, with:

"Al Nakia is a saheb, and thou knowest what the sahebs are—*all* sahebs"—dwelling slightly on the word, and winking rapidly in the direction of the neighboring tent whence drifted the sound of Mr. Preserved Higgins' raucous voice.

Of old, the governor was familiar with his countryman's methods of innuendo.

"Didst thou say—*all* sahebs, heart of my heart?" he inquired, casually, duplicating the other's wink.

"Yes." Koom Khan sighed. "Thou knowest the saheb-log. They either give thee three times what thou deservest, or they give thee nothing at all. Strange cattle—I do not trust them."

And after a pause, a silence broken only by the gurgling sounds of the hubble-bubbles, he went on, with sudden, frank, naïve simplicity:

"Abderrahman—I do not trust *thy* saheb!"

"Higgins saheb?"

"No. The other saheb—who looks like a lance at rest."

"Ah?" breathed the governor, without looking up.

"Indeed. There is about him a lean and nasty wolfishness of expression that, if I had a herd of sheep to protect, would cause me to double my sticks and treble my swords and quadruple my camp fires—that would induce me to surround myself with nineteen times nineteen traps. Good, sound traps that snap the wolf's legs and keep him—where he belongs!"

And when Abderrahman Yahiah Khan raised his eyebrows, questioningly, he stabbed a finger through the half-open tent flap toward the purpling night sky where a big, detached cloud was floating across the face of the moon.

"The moon careth not for the cloud," he said, "and the saheb-log careth not for me—or thee—unless it be to use us for personal benefit."

He was silent.

From the outside came a soft, throaty gurgle of camels jerking at their headstalls, and a feeble, dry sound of a sentinel's rifle dragging against the withered, tufted desert grass; and, presently, the tail end of an English song flung to the night in Tollemache Wade's frank, untrained voice:

> "Here's to the fox
> In his earth below the rocks . . ."

"Decidedly," went on Koom Khan, "if I were thou, I would cut the saheb's throat."

He said it with simple, sincere ruthlessness, undisguised, but neither vindictive nor cruel; rather with something which proved beyond all doubt that he was of the Orient, which showed, in a way, how an Asian can hold to the blind belief of his personal will, conviction, or even whim against the opinions, the customs, the saving prejudices, and the codified laws of the rest of the world; something of that profoundly sincere and honest stubbornness, that trust in himself against all odds, which, on the one hand, can turn the leader of a band of nomad cut-throats—an Attila or a Genghiz Khan, a Nadir Shah or a Peshwah Saheb—into a scourge of mankind, and, on the other hand, can change an ordinary peasant or fisherman into a prophet of the faith.

Both ruthlessness, lawlessness, serene contempt and negligence of existing conditions—working for the good or for the bad, as the case may be.

"Kill him, soul of my soul," Koom Khan repeated, "and let the rest be as Allah willeth."

The other puffed at his pipe. Of old, he knew Koom Khan; knew, thus, that he was chary of speech and that the blood-thirsty advice was not the result of a sudden racial or cultural animosity against the saheb-log. There must be another, more direct cause.

Finally he decided to ask a frank question—frank, that is, according to the limitations of the Oriental mind.

"Koom Khan," he said, "I do not love the sahebs any more than thou. Yet am I a reasonable man, washed in thirty-seven buckets of patient wisdom. Tell me," he went on, dreamily, "if a scorpion could spin a silk cocoon, would I crush it under foot—or would I feed it choice mulberry leaves?"

"But"—came the counter question, "suppose the scorpion weaves a silken net with which to strangle—*thee?*"

The governor shook his head.

"No, no," he said. "The saheb intends no treachery. He is my ally. He needs my armed men, my knowledge of the land, as I need his wisdom in war, and the other saheb's money-bags. We made a bargain."

"And yet," Koom Khan breathed, softly, "I have heard in the bazaars that the young saheb dreams of mating with the princess Aziza Nurmahal."

Abderrahman Yahiah Khan looked puzzled.

"Why—of course!" he rejoined. "Such is the understanding. The saheb is the 'Expected One'!"

"Is he?"

Koom Khan laughed long and riotously, his whole body shaken jerkily by the panting, gurgling catches of his breath.

But it was not a merry laughter—bitter it was, grim, sardonic. And grim, too, was his exclamation, as he rose and stretched his stout arms to heaven:

"By the teeth of God—I was a fool, then, to leave the silken security of Tamerlanistan, to brave the dangers of the open road with my women and servants

and children, to come to thee and ask thee for the hand of protection and the sweet salt of hospitality! I was a fool—a fool!"

"But—I thought that thou hadst a quarrel with Al Nakia."

"I did—because of thee, soul of my soul!"

"Because of—me?"

"Yes—because of thee and of thy twin brother, the governor of the eastern marches . . ."

"May his soul pass quickly into the dark!" the other interjected with brotherly affection. And he asked: "What has that brother of mine, that son of a dog, to do with . . ."

"Everything. He came to court, speaking slurring words about thee—at least I thought then that they were slurring. He said how first thou hadst sent brave messages that thou wouldst conquer Tamerlanistan and wed the princess, and how afterwards thou didst show thyself a most base-born dog by giving up thy claims to the princess' hand for a turbanful of gold. I called thy brother a liar. There were words. Swords were drawn. Al Nakia took thy brother's part, and I defied him and came here—and now thou dost tell me—that indeed . . . *Bismillah!* I was a fool!"

And again he broke into raucous laughter, while the governor looked down, silent, meditative.

"Abderrahman," said Koom Khan, rising, "it is against the blessed laws of decency for a Moslem to discuss a woman, to speak of her soul and heart and desires. To do so are the manners of infidel pigs. But—thou art my friend. Thou hast opened wide to

me the tent of thy hospitality. We have eaten salt and bread together. Thus I shall tell thee!"

"What?"

"About Aziza Nurmahal. She heard of thy one-time boast, that thou wouldst make her a captive to thy bow and spear and marry her, with or against her will. And she said to a slave who is a friend of a dancing girl whom I know well—alas! too well!"—he sighed—"she said that she loves a bold man, a careless man, a free man who takes by force what his passion and love desires. And—thou . . ." He slurred, stopped, and went on: "If I were thou, I would cut the saheb's throat. But then I am an impulsive man, a man who plunges into the pool of life negligent of its black, frowning depths, a foolish man who always plays the game of his undoing—and not, as thou art, a wise man, a careful counter of gold and silver and other loot!"

And, late that night, he sent a trusted slave up the *Darb-i-Sultani,* who arrived at the palace of Tamerlanistan three days later, with the metaphorical message to Al Nakia:

"Koom Khan sends many salaams. Too, he sends word that the iron has entered the buffalo's soul. Presently the buffalo will turn and gore to the death the lean saheb who looks like a lance at rest."

"Good!" cried Gulabian, after Hector had told him the message.

"Good!" croaked the old nurse.

"Good indeed!" echoed Aziza Nurmahal.

But Hector shook his head. It was the latter part

of the message which disturbed him. For, while he himself had sent Koom Khan to the rebel camp to spread there the seeds of mistrust and dissension, he had never imagined that the man would elaborate his instructions so as to cause Abderrahman Yahiah Khan to commit murder.

Murder! Deliberate, cold-blooded murder!

No, no! It went against his grain, and he said so to the others:

"I won't have it. It can't be done."

"Thou art a saheb!" grumbled the old nurse. "Thou art a soft man . . ."

"And it is the sahebs' softness," smilingly cut in Hector, "which is their strength. Their softness is the rope by which they dangle the world to their fancy."

And he sent the messenger back to Koom Khan with the words:

"Al Nakia sends many salaams, and the following explicit instructions: there is no worth in blood; blood forever demands to be wiped out by darkening blood, making the red chain endless. Thus, do not let the buffalo redden his horns with the lean saheb's gore."

CHAPTER XIV

The governor of the western marches "gets religion." Mr. Warburton gives bakshish to Baluchi ruffians! Hector rushes off! And the old nurse decides that the little princess should marry a man who beats her—not too much!

When the confidential messenger returned to the rebel camp and delivered Hector's instructions to Koom Khan, the latter shrugged his massive shoulders resignedly and observed, with a painful effect after casualness, that Al Nakia might have saved himself the trouble since an elephant was an elephant on low ground as well as on high, while a coward was a coward with or without a weapon.

A cryptic saying which the messenger was presently able to decipher by listening to the rumors, the babble and gossip and laughter, that swept through the camp, causing the Arabs to scream with amusement after the manner of their kind, causing the Persians to make impromptu and mostly indecent puns, causing the renegade Tamerlanis to slap their stout thighs in an abandonment of mirth—causing, furthermore, Mr. Preserved Higgins to curse fantastically and the Sheik-ul-Islam to declare, with hypocritical, pontifical unction, that Allah was indeed most great, and that there was shining truth in the *sura* of the Koran where it said that "verily repentance will be accepted

by Allah from those who do evil ignorantly, and then repent speedily; unto them Allah will turn with forgiveness; for He is knowing and wise and merciful!"

For it appeared that, suddenly, without any known reason, both Abderrahman Yahiah Khan and his friend and ally, "The Basin," had—to put it vulgarly—"got religion."

At first, when early that morning the governor of the western marches mentioned that he and Musa Al-Mutasim were going toward the Afghan border on a pious pilgrimage to the shrine of a certain canonized doctor of Koranic theology, called Syyed Ahmet el-Tachfin the Clarified-Butter Seller, and to go there through many intricate religious rites and ceremonies, Mr. Preserved Higgins and Tollemache Wade treated it in the light of a rather crude jest. For it was a notorious fact that, of all the bad Moslems in Central Asia, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan was the worst, with Musa Al-Mutasim running him a close second. From gambling to drinking fermented spirits, from refusing alms to the poor to robbing the orphans of their portion, from practicing usury to neglecting their prayers, there were few Koranic laws which they did not break, almost daily, and with a sort of sneering bravado.

"Right-oh!" said Mr. Higgins, the Babu interpreting. "That's wot you need—religion—bloomin' fine joke!"

But the other turned on him a stony and reproachful eye.

"Saheb," he said, "it is not fitting to make a mock of a man's honest repentance. I have been a sinner of sins. So has Musa Al-Mutasim. And now we go

to the shrine of the Clarified-Butter Seller to cleanse our souls and to make our peace with Allah and his blessed Prophet!"

Then, suddenly, it dawned upon Tollemache Wade that the man was in earnest, and so he tried to argue with him, told him to defer his sacred pilgrimage until after the coming campaign against Tamerlanistan.

The governor shook his head.

"No, no," he said. "For too many years have I broken the blessed laws of the Prophet Mohammed—"

"On whom Peace!" chimed in "The Basin" sonorously and mendaciously.

"And last night, in my dreams, the Prophet spoke to me and told me that ill luck would follow my enterprise unless I repent my sins and follies and evil deeds."

"But—look here—what about . . . ?"

"Do not worry, saheb. It will be months yet before we will be ready to attack Tamerlanistan and put thee on the throne as the 'Expected One.' Do thou continue drilling the troops, while I and Musa Al-Mutasim prostrate our ignoble bodies before the sainted spirit of the Clarified-Butter Seller!"

Practically the same thing he said to Koom Khan, who fumed and raged.

"Thou art a fool, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan! First thou shouldst cut the saheb's throat—then thy prayers will rise the more sweetly to Allah's nostrils!"

Abderrahman Yahiah Khan heaved a sigh of hypocritical resignation.

"Heart of my heart," he said, gently, "thou, too, art a sinner of sins, a deceiver of deceits, a curser of

curses. Come with me and Musa Al-Mutasim. Prostrate thy unworthy self before . . ."

"Coward!" screamed Koom Khan, who saw that his pet scheme, the murder of Tollemache Wade by the governor's hands, was slipping away. "Fool! Drunkard! Jew! Christian! O thou abuser of the salt! O thou cold of countenance! O thou son of a burnt father! O thou spawn of exceeding filth! O thou whose back should be slippered with many slipperings! O thou . . ."

"I am all that," said the governor, inclining his head with a fine show of humility, "and a great and wicked sinner. Thus, too, is Musa Al-Mutasim," pointing at "The Basin," who stood motionless, though he was choking with inward laughter. "And that is just why we go on pilgrimage to cleanse our souls . . ."

"Curse your filthy souls!"

"Peace, brother Moslem! Peace and patience!" said the governor, making a mental note of the insults the other had heaped on his head and promising to repay them later on with interest. There was no hurry.

And, half an hour later, he and the renegade Arab were off, astride swift *sowarri* racing dromedaries, toward the southeast, away from the *Darb-i-Sultani,* skirting Tamerlanistan's southern frontier, in the direction of the Persian Gulf.

They drove their grunting, protesting animals mercilessly, at top speed, through an arid land spotted with sweet-scented *shih* grass and dwarf acacia, and torn

by dry, rock-strewn watercourses that had once been used for irrigation purposes—watercourses on which both Mr. Preserved Higgins and Mr. Warburton were figuring in their hunt after "concessions"—watercourses the eastern end of which an Afghan guide was just then pointing out to the American as the caravan which had brought him and his daughter from India, was reaching the eastern plains of Tamerlanistan.

On they rode, the robber chief's immense bulk bobbing up and down like a meal sack, the governor perched on his peaked saddle like a lean, ironic monkey, and as they rode, they talked, and as they talked they laughed—riotously, exaggeratedly.

Yet, had Koom Khan or the Cockney millionaire taken the precaution of having them followed, they would have noticed that, a few days later, the two repentant sinners seemed suddenly to forget all about their pilgrimage to the shrine of the canonized Clarified-Butter Seller.

For, a day's journey from the Afghan border where it dips toward the Persian Gulf, they turned due north, through an alluvial plain studded with basalt rocks and jagged green stone; above, a sky like polished, blue steel, with a tremendous blaze of orange sunlight that glared down without the thinnest veil of mist cloud.

There were few signs of life, and they were glad of it, as their plan depended as much on secrecy as on speed; only once in a while a carrion kite poised high in the parched heavens, or, silently, sulkily jog-

ging along, an Afghan or Baluchi camel rider, whose jaws and brows were bound mummy fashion against the stinging sand of the desert; and late one afternoon they overtook a gigantic cotton wain that was drawn by twenty bullocks about the size of Newfoundland dogs—a sign that they were drawing nearer to the capital.

A few words with the driver of the wain elicited the information that the weekly caravan from India was due in twenty-four hours, and so, having decided, for reasons of their own, to go to the capital; having furthermore decided, for reasons connected with the safety of their heads, that it would be unwise to do so in their characters of rebel leader and robber chief, they kept on to the north, and, the following day, reached the *Darb-al-Sharki,* the highway that enters Tamerlanistan from the east, having made a sweeping detour around the city and debouched on a spot far removed from the direction of the western marches.

There they dismounted, took off their clothes, opened their saddle-bags, and, inside of half an hour, faced each other looking for all the world like a couple of ruffianly Afghan *charpadars,* drovers, with their beards shaved off, their mustaches well trimmed, their heads crowned with immense fur caps that came down over their brows, their bodies in tattered shirts, indigo-dyed, and girt with twisted camel-hair ropes, their legs sheathed in loose muslin trousers, their feet protected from the stones of the road by sandals of thick leather kept in place by narrow thongs tied to the ankles, great iron spurs strapped to their naked

heels, and appropriately armed with *cheray* daggers and pistols.

Then, having hobbled their dromedaries, they sat down by the side of the road, filled their mouths with finely cut *pan,* chewed and spat contentedly, and smiled at one another as Greek is said to smile at Greek.

"They"—said Musa Al-Mutasim, pointing in the general direction of Tamerlanistan and giving the Arab equivalent for swallowing the bait, hook, line, and sinker—"will climb the thorn tree and wish they had not forgotten their loin-cloths."

"Yes. For who would recognize the great brigand chief, Musa Al-Mutasim, in a lousy Afghan *charpadar?"* inquired Abderrahman Yahiah Khan.

"And who," countered "The Basin," "would recognize in even such a one the haughty and renowned governor of the western marches?"

"Not Al Nakia, I hope!"

"Nor that Armenian son of a pig!"

"Nor Ayesha Zemzem!"

"Nor Wahab al-Shaitan!"

"Nor," said the governor with a wink and a leer, "the little, little princess until . . ."

"Yes," smiled the Arab as the other paused, "until thy strong arms crush her against thy breast!"

And they talked for a long time, with frequent allusions to Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh,* the old prime minister who had gone to the far places shortly before the Ameer's death, and to a certain ancient Tartar castle which, judging from the Arab's gestures, was situated somewhere, vaguely, in the southwest and was named *Jabul-i-Shuhada,* "The

Place of the Martyrs," after a handful of Moslem braves who had once defended it, for over two years, against an army of savage, heathen Turkis.

"It is a stout place, easy to defend," said the Arab, "and it is always in readiness. Often have I found there asylum and safety."

"Good!"

And then they smiled and were silent again, and waited patiently, until, late in the afternoon, when a faint, silvery tinkle of camels' bells and a neighing of horses warned them that the caravan which they were expecting was approaching.

Not long afterwards it came into view, the camels jogging along Indian file, tied head to tail, looming up on the sky line like a grotesque scrawl of Arab handwriting. At the head of the caravan, followed by half-a-dozen mounted, armed *tofanghees,* irregular soldiers, rode the leader, a gigantic Baluchi. At the very end a *shugduf* litter was carried between two swaying, pacing dromedaries.

It was made of wicker and carved and painted deodar wood, elaborately ornamented with silk cordage and covered with a splendid Daghestan rug in heliotrope and rose. The curtains were open, giving a glimpse of the occupant, a young girl, fair haired, brown eyed; and by its side rode a man on a fiery Kabuli stallion that he found difficulty in controlling.

It may have been the fault of the saddle—an American McClellan, and not the huge, peaked affair to which Central Asian horses are used—and it was this sad-

dle which first attracted Musa Al-Mutasim's special attention.

"A foreigner," he said. "A saheb—yes!" His gray eyes lit up as they roamed to the glimpse of golden hair and milky skin between the curtains of the litter. "And a foreign woman—a mem-saheb!"

"We are in luck!" laughed Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, "for it is easy to lie to a saheb. Too easy!" he added, almost regretfully, like a man who is wasting his God-given talent on an unappreciative audience.

And, a few minutes later, he and "The Basin" salaamed before the foreigner, their arms folded across their breasts in sign of fealty and humility, and imploring the saheb for permission to join his caravan as far as the capital. For, to quote Abderrahman Yahiah Khan's words, a wise man "muddies his trail."

The Baluchi, who was the leader of the caravan and who had a fair knowledge of English, acted as dragoman, and it is a moot question whether it was through intention or accident that Musa Al-Mutasim let him see the bulging middle of a well-filled purse.

At all events, the Baluchi, whose name was Nureddin Zaid, seconded the prayers of the two men.

"They are poor, Warburton saheb," he said. "They ask you for your protection. They say that you are their father and their mother . . ."

"How gorgeously thrilling, dad!" came a soft voice from the litter, and Jane looked down. "Why, I always thought that I was all the family you had—and here you are father and mother to . . ."

Mr. Warburton made an impatient gesture.

"No, Nureddin," he said to the Baluchi. "Tell them I'm sorry, but . . ."

"Why not, dad?" asked the girl. "Do let them come with us. They are *such* picturesque ruffians—and I simply dote on local color!"

Mr. Warburton grumbled.

"I can't do it, Jane," he said. "Sir James Rivet-Carnac was very particular about strangers not joining our caravan."

For Sir James, the day before the Warburtons had left Calcutta, had had a confidential message from Mr. Preserved Higgins.

The latter had received cabled advice from a certain sandy-haired gentleman who had an office in Upper Thames Street, London, that the mysterious old Oriental in Coal Yard Street, off Drury Lane, had left England; and Mr. Higgins, thinking that the Oriental, if he came to Tamerlanistan, might, for certain reasons which he talked over with the Babu, seriously interfere with his plan of proclaiming Tollemache Wade as the "Expected One"; knowing that it would be very difficult to shadow the old man once he had disappeared in India's brown swirl; and believing, finally, in sweeping and ruthless methods when big things were at stake, had requested Sir James that, temporarily, *all* caravans from India to Tamerlanistan be stopped.

Sir James had tried to obey. But Mr. Warburton had been obdurate, had used counter-influences with the India Office, and had received his passports. Finally Sir James had compromised by endeavoring

to make sure that nobody except the Warburtons and their guide and servants should leave India for Tamerlanistan; and so, with the help of mendacious warnings about some mysterious Russian political intrigue, he had asked the American to let no stranger attach himself to his caravan at any time of the journey.

"I can't do it, Jane," repeated Mr. Warburton. "It wouldn't be fair to Sir James."

"I don't care!" the girl exclaimed. "Fair to Sir James—indeed! Why, he's a dreadful person. Remember how he boasted about refusing a passport to Hector—and yet I wager Hector got away all right, otherwise I would have heard from him or seen him . . . Dad!" she went on, "haven't I been nice about Hector?"

"Nice? What do you mean?"

"Well—I didn't nag you about him, did I? I've hardly ever mentioned him these last weeks."

"That's true," admitted her father, rather grudgingly.

"Well—then you really might be a dear and do that little thing for me!"

"What little thing?"

"To let these two men join our caravan."

"But why, child?"

"Oh—they are *so* funny—the thin one who looks like an Asiatic Don Quixote, and the fat one who looks like a wicked Pickwick! They'll lend such a bully spice of romance to our trip!"

"Oh . . . romance! This is a business trip, daughter."

"Don't rub it in, dad—and don't you dare play the tired business man 'steen thousand miles away from Wall Street!"

And, seeing her father smile in spite of himself and interpreting it as his permission for her to do as she pleased, she turned to the Baluchi and told him the two strangers were welcome to join them.

Whence many salaams, flowery thanks, and Musa Al-Mutasim's gray, piercing eyes resting admiringly on this strong-willed mem-saheb who—as he whispered into his friend's ear—"drives the passion of a man as the east wind drives a sheet of flame!"

Thus rebel governor and robber chief accompanied the Warburton party in their rôles of simple Afghan *charpadars,* speaking little, but listening attentively to the gossip of the servants and soldiers; they traveled at a good speed; and they had already drawn within sight of the capital, with its terrace roofs stretching white, the palm gardens that bordered the suburbs lifting their feathery fronds coquettishly, and the elaborate dome of the Gengizkhani palace arrogantly rising to the tight, sapphire-blue heaven, when Musa Al-Mutasim, seeing that his friend, the governor, was deeply in conversation with a village girl who had approached the caravan offering fruit and milk for sale, slipped over to the side of the Baluchi guide and, as before, showed him his bulging purse.

Came a whispered conversation, the Arab's hand bending to the other's with a pleasant tinkle of gold, and, not long afterwards, the Baluchi approaching Mr. Warburton and remarking humbly that he was the

saheb's slave, and that the saheb was the light of his countenance and the stone of his everlasting contentment.

Mr. Warburton was familiar with certain phases of the Orient.

"Let's take all that for granted," he replied, brutally. "How much are you going to overcharge me?"

Nureddin Zaid, the Baluchi, looked at the American reproachfully.

"Saheb," he said, "this is not a question of money. It is a question of my affection and loyalty to you."

"Yes?" Mr. Warburton looked up, surprised, a little suspicious.

"Yes. You have been kind and generous. So has the little mem-saheb"—pointing at Jane who, well out of hearing, was amusedly watching Abderrahman Yahiah Khan's flirtatious conversation with the village girl. "And thus I would like to repay you, saheb!"

And he talked long and earnestly to Mr. Warburton, with the result that the latter, a few minutes afterwards, told his daughter that she would stay here, at the village outside the city walls, under the protection of half-a-dozen soldiers, until he sent for her.

"I want to go with you, dad."

"No, Jane. It isn't safe. Nureddin Zaid told me that the prime minister of Tamerlanistan, the chap they call Al Nakia is . . . oh . . ." he coughed.

"A Don Juan?" she laughed. "Why, dad, I can take care of myself. I've played around New York and Paris and London, you know."

"But this is the Orient, my dear, and things are

different. Nureddin Zaid told me you'd be perfectly safe the moment Al Nakia gives me his solemn oath —but not before. So, my dear, I'd much rather you stay here—won't you please?"

Thus the mild and meek American parent whose words, when he talked to men of millions on Wall Street or on the Stock Exchange, popped sharp and dry like machine-gun bullets; and Jane smiled.

"Certainly, dad," she said. "I don't want to worry you."

"Thanks, my dear. I'll send for you just as soon as Al Nakia promises me."

A few hours later, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan and "The Basin," whom the Tamerlani officials at the eastern gate had passed in without question as evidently belonging to the saheb's retinue, had disappeared in the packed, greasy wilderness of houses that ran from the Bazaar of the Mutton Butchers to the Ghulan River where stood the dead Ameer's mausoleum, while Mr. Warburton, whose Baluchi guide had left the moment he had been paid his wages and a handsome *bakshish* in appreciation of his loyal warning about Al Nakia, was sitting on a rickety, three-legged chair in the *chapar-khanah,* the official rest house for distinguished travelers, trying to convince a bored, bearded major-domo by sign language that goat stewed in honey and spiced with asafœtida, badly cooked brinjal, unripe melons, underdone bread, and luke-warm licorice water were not the right sort of diet for a dyspeptic stomach.

Finally he gave up in despair, and contented him-

self with a simple repast consisting of a glass of milk and a fat, black cigar, and sat down on the open veranda, watching the scene outside on the market-place: the low line of shops overflowing with vegetables, grains, cloths, slippers, ropes, household utensils, brasses, and whatever else measured the scale of the natives' modest wants; a dozen or so desert men squatting around little fagots of brushwood spread on the ground, and beyond them the gaunt, sneering, huddled shapes of their dromedaries; a butcher's shop, his fly-blown stock-in-trade of beef and mutton quarters hanging from the limbs of a dead tree; turbaned and fur-capped people of every tint and costume, picturesque and swaggering alike in their bright silks and their worn, tattered rags, all haggling, laughing, babbling, shouting, all typical of Asia, that most disconcerting continent—disconcerting, that is, to professional Occidental psychologists—which, somehow, blends an ancient wisdom with an eternal, perversely childlike simplicity of soul.

There he sat and watched, slightly homesick, slightly discouraged, not with the eventual success of his enterprise, but with the brooding thought that success in Asia meant nothing after all; for, even suppose he was granted his "concession," developed the western province, reaped a benefit for himself and his backers, and increased the standard of living of the natives . . . what then? Asia was too big, too big to grasp even mentally, and a local success . . . why, it was like shooting at an elephant with a pea-shooter!

And so he thought, while he waited for the return of the messenger whom he had sent to the Babu

Chandra, local agent of the Cable Company and his own more or less trusted representative, with word that he was in town and wished to see him at once.

The Babu came not long afterwards, coquettish as to attire, with his patent leather pumps and open-work silk socks, his gaudy umbrella and the freshly varnished, crimson caste mark on his low forehead, his sagging lips bubbling florid, frothy greetings, protestations of undying loyalty, mendacious statements that he, his wife, his mother, and his cow were dying of starvation, and complaints against the Babu Bansi and Mr. Preserved Higgins, whose ancestors, it appeared, had been born noseless and devoid of shame for untold generations . . . a stream of words cut short by Mr. Ezra Warburton's "All right. Let's take all that for granted."

"But—Higgins saheb is making mischief in the West. He is . . ."

"That's why I am here. I want an audience as soon as possible with that—what's his name—the fellow who seems to be ace high here . . ."

"Al Nakia?"

"Yes. I want to see him, right away. Can you fix it up?"

"Yes, Heaven-Born."

"When?"

"At once. At least—this afternoon. About two hours from now he receives in open *durbar,* saheb."

"Good. You'd better come along and play interpreter, Bansi."

At which the Babu smiled.

"Heaven-Born," he said, "Al Nakia speaks English."

"Educated abroad, I guess?"

"No. He is a saheb, like yourself!"

Even so two hours later—two hours pregnant with motley happenings, with the clash of swords, the cries of dying men, the lust of a Tamerlani, and the greed of an Arab—Mr. Ezra Warburton was utterly surprised when, ushered into the presence of Al Nakia, he discovered that the latter was Hector Wade.

And the surprise was mutual. Too, it was typical of American and Briton.

"I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed the former.

"How d'ye do?" said the latter, extending a limp and gawkish hand.

Came an embarrassed silence, until finally the financier, with the abrupt directness of his nation, decided that the past was the past and, as such, must be left to take care of itself; that, whatever the truth or untruth as to the disgraceful card scandal which had banished Hector Wade from the society of decent people, and whatever the methods through which he had reached his present eminent position, that position itself was a fact—and he was here on business.

Business! The sacred Grail of his life!

And business he would talk, and did talk.

"About those land development concessions," he began. "I guess I can make you a pretty fair offer—an offer you won't be able to refuse."

He went on to say that he knew about the rebellion which had broken out in the western marches and

about Mr. Preserved Higgins' part in it, but that he himself . . .

"Well, Mr. Wade, you know that I've quite a little pull with the British government. What you need is rifles and ammunition and supplies, and I'll make it my affair to see that you get them. On the other hand—well—I am a business man, not an altruist, and so . . ."

And he talked on, outlining his plan.

But Hector was hardly listening. Loverlike, he saw in Mr. Warburton's gray, ascetic features a shadowy and sentimental resemblance to a little oval of a face, crowned by a mass of hair that was like curled sunlight; he wondered about Jane, and, with single-minded, self-centered English tactlessness, he voiced his wonder the next moment, cutting through Mr. Warburton's intricate sentence, which was filled to the brim with rates of interest and difficulties of transportation and unearned increment and sinking fund and similar financial details.

"How is your daughter, Mr. Warburton?"

And, suddenly, Mr. Warburton smiled.

It was not that he had forgotten about Jane. He couldn't very well, for her personality was too femininely insistent. But, momentarily, her picture had become rather blurred in the mazes of dollars and cents.

So he smiled, just a little guiltily.

"The joke is on me," he said. "That infernal Baluchi guide of mine told me that you were—oh—all sorts of a gay and festive dog."

Hector flared up.

"I . . . what?"

"I had no idea you were Hector Wade. I thought you were some Oriental Don Juan. That's what my Baluchi told me. Told me—oh, well—that a girl wasn't safe with you unless she was accompanied by half-a-dozen chaperons armed to the teeth, and so he persuaded me to leave Jane in a little village oasis—the last one the other side of the eastern gate."

"What did he do that for?" Hector was puzzled, faintly uneasy.

"Oh—just to work me for a tip, I suppose. And he worked me all right. That final *bakshish* I gave him is going to make history in Central Asia."

And he laughed again. For he was a shrewd business man who believed in the rhythmic law of human equation, the personal element, and as frequently, in New York and London, he had discovered that the roseate geniality due to a dry Martini, a lavish display of ambiguous *hors d'œuvres,* ornamental ices in frilled pink papers, and the right sort of coffee and liqueur, were of valuable help in directing a man's judgment and fountain pen; thus the flash of Jane's dark eyes through the center of this prosy business discussion might help in influencing the young Englishman.

"I'll send for her as soon as we're through with our little talk," he said. "She'll be all right at the village, in the meantime."

"I suppose so," said Hector, still with that same faint uneasiness; and once more the financier launched forth upon the roaming, treacherous sea of dollars and cents which he knew so well how to navigate.

"As to those land concessions," he began again, "my proposition is fair and square . . ."

Hector Wade jerked himself back into the reality of things.

"Mr. Warburton," he said, "I do not doubt it in the least. Fair and square. Of course. But only fair and square according to the limits of your understanding!"

"The—limits of my . . . ?" Mr. Warburton stammered. An angry red flushed his lean cheeks. He did not like to have his probity impugned, even in a roundabout way; and it was that which the other was evidently trying to do.

"According to the limits of your understanding—exactly!" Hector went on. "But not according to the understanding of Asia."

"Is this an ethical discussion or a business discussion?" demanded the financier with a faint sneer.

"Both—as it ought to be. You see, your ideas on progress and happiness . . ."

"Interchangeable terms!"

"So *you* say! Your ideas and those of the Orient do not happen to dovetail. You say that money, and the progress which money buys, is happiness; and the Orient replies that poverty can often be a far greater happiness—if poverty brings contentment."

"Poverty—brings—contentment?" Here was a revolutionary theory which nettled the financier.

"Poverty from your point of view," smiled Hector, "and not from the point of view of the Orient. *My* Tamerlanis"—and he dwelt just a little on the "my"

—"are rich—*and* happy—when they have three square meals a day, a handful of brittle Latakia tobacco leaves and . . ."

"But you are a European!" interrupted Mr. Warburton. "You are an Englishman, the descendant of a nation of shopkeepers."

"Yes. But I am also the regent of this country. And I have not been here very long. Perhaps a measure of development may do Tamerlanistan a whole lot of good. I don't know—yet."

"I can prove to you that . . ."

"You can prove to me exactly nothing—at least about Tamerlanistan. I must learn by myself, and I am rather slow. I take one step at a time, and my present step is over yonder"—he pointed west, through the window where brilliant wedges of sunlight misted the town with golden gauze. "I must pacify the border province. Nothing else counts."

"Right there I can help you. I tell you I have a great deal of pull with the British-Indian government."

"Oh, yes. You told me. Rifles and bullets and all that sort of thing. But I fancy I shan't need them. I have rather a different plan. Anyway, there'll be no talk of concessions until either I know more about Tamerlanistan than I do know, or until the former prime minister, Hajji Akhbar Khan, returns from abroad. He and the late Ameer had certain ideas about these concessions."

"I remember," said Mr. Warburton, with rather a grim smile. "They wouldn't even listen to the propositions I made them through the Babu Chandra—"

"And perhaps they were right. From all I hear about Hajji Akhbar Khan . . ."

And then, with utter, dramatic suddenness, the name of the Hajji was echoed by a shrill voice that drifted through the curtains which separated the audience hall from the women's quarter.

"Hajji Akhbar Khan—didst thou say?" It was the old nurse's screaming voice. "And dost thou mean to tell me that the princess—that little, little fool of a princess—went there, without telling me? Why didst *thou* not tell me, O daughter of a noseless she-camel?"

The next moment she burst into the audience hall, like a miniature whirlwind of passion, her wizened, berry-brown features distorted with rage and grief, dragging after her a weeping slave girl whom she cuffed and kicked as a sort of accompaniment to the tale which she poured into Hector's ear.

"*Zid! Zid!*—Hurry! Hurry!" she wound up, and Hector, pale, slightly trembling, turned to the American.

"Pardon my abruptness," he said, "I have to go . . ."

"Has anything happened? Can I help you?"

"I don't know. No time to explain. Awfully sorry."

And he picked up the ancient Oriental blade from a low taboret and ran out of the audience hall and into the outer court.

A splendid stallion was there, champing at his bit, saddled, gayly caparisoned, belonging to some courtier who had come for audience.

Hector threw his leg across the saddle, and was off

at a gallop, while the old nurse looked after him, trembling, crying . . . and presently turned again to the slave girl.

"Why didst thou not tell me, daughter of a wart?"

"I couldn't—the princess never thought that the Hajji wasn't . . ."

"She has less sense even than thou! A husband—that is what she needs! A husband who beats her—but not too much—or may Allah help him!" she wound up in a disconcerting mingling of defiance and gentleness.

"What has happened?" Mr. Warburton asked Babu Chandra, who had come into the audience hall, fully as excited as the nurse had been.

"The Princess Aziza Nurmahal fell into a trap. And so—so did . . ."

"Who?"

"Your daughter, Heaven-Born!"

And, like the nurse, he told a jerking, hysterical tale, at the end of which the financier, even as Hector had done, rushed out of the palace, into the outer court, and mounted the first horse he saw.

And off and away, toward the eastern gate, toward the open country that rose slowly, gradually, to a far horizon of soft curves and blue vapors, slashed with silver and nicked with livid purple, while Hector was urging his stallion toward the West, where the Ghulan River laid a shining ribbon across the town's straggling suburbs, and where the turrets and bulbous domes of the dead Ameer's mausoleum swept to the sky in a stony abandon.

CHAPTER XV

In which Hector breaks the seal of the ancient prophecy and finds that blood is thicker than water, thicker than the clogging, stinking dust of the centuries.

YET, going back to the old nurse's vituperations and tears and frantic appeals to Allah, the Prophet, and a variety of Moslem saints that reverberated through the Gengizkhani palace from turret to cellar, causing the eunuchs to touch their blue beads as a protection against evil, and the servants huddled over the cook pots to cringe as if expecting a beating, it was perhaps natural enough that the princess, in a moment of exuberant joy, should have obeyed the strange summons without suspecting a trap.

For, after all, a high-caste Oriental girl is in everything except a frank knowledge and discussion of sex questions and a certain familiarity with the tortuous mazes of palace politics, very much like a European or American girl hedged in by the gently nefarious and nefariously gentle, inhibiting social regulations that are the result of the Mid-Victorian inheritance of cant—the world, to both the former and the latter, offering nothing to do except a rather functionless existence varied by calls, genteel literature, genteel athletics, and genteel dusting.

In the case of the European girl, it is the parent who does the step-by-step supervising, while in that

of Aziza Nurmahal it was the old nurse who ruled, socially, for all her menial position.

Thus the little princess was unprepared to cope with the unexpected—such as the strange summons.

A summons—by the lips of a rough, fur-capped Afghan *charpadar* who had bullied his way past the sentinels, through outer and inner courtyard, up the stairs, and into the ante-room of the harem where he had startled a pert-eyed, golden-skinned slave girl into attention by methods peculiar; methods that combined bribery, flattery, brutality, and open, rather riotous love-making.

"Tell the princess that *I* am here!" he had said, with a lordly air.

"Thou?" The girl had made a mocking salaam. "And who then art thou? Art thou the Ameer of Bokhara? The Amban of Kashgar? The Rajah of Karpathala? Or perhaps His Majesty the yellow Emperor of far China himself?"

He had flipped a coin into her ready hand.

"One thing I would like to be," he had replied, staring at her out of his bold eyes until she had blushed, "and one thing I am!"

"Yes?"

"Indeed, O Small Bud to be worn in the Turban of my Heart! For I would like to be thy lover! I would like to crush thy lips with mine. I would like to hold thy soft, trembling body with the impatient strength of my arms. But—by the scarlet pig's bristles!—it is only the vain wind of desire tickling my nostrils and shortening my breath. For thou art

a perfumed jewel, palace born, palace bred, palace spoiled. The longing in thy downy heart is for a silk clad, jessamine scented courtier, while I"—and he had had the unblushing effrontery to simulate a melancholy sigh—"am only a rough Afghan, a Soleymani of Soleymanis!"

"What then dost thou want with the princess—being only an Afghan?"

"News—I bring her! Splendid news! Happy news! Joyful news! News slashed with sun gold and nicked with the moon's silver glitter! News that will cause her to fill thy lap and mine with seventeen camels' loads of red Persian gold! *But*—the message is secret, Rejoicer of Souls! There must be no blabbing to that dried-up and malodorous goat udder of an Ayesha Zemzem, nor to that cousin of a dung heap who calls himself Al Nakia, nor to any leaky palace tongue. These be news only for the princess' rosy ears!"

"But—consider the laws of the harem . . ."

"Consider the pimples on the back of a cockroach! Laws! Do not quote laws to an Afghan. To do so would be like reciting the Koran to the buffalo about to gore thee. Away with thee, O Small, Soft Thing"—pinching her cheeks—"and call thy mistress!"

The slave girl had left, to return, a few minutes later, with the princess who, at the Afghan's first words, spoken in a very low voice, had burst into a shout of joy, and a quick exclamation of:

"The Haj—" as quickly stopped by the man's warning hiss:

"No, no, Heaven-Born! Be careful!"

And he had whispered to her at length, winding up with "I do not know his reasons. I am his servant. I listen and I obey. And so I gave thee the message he gave me. Come with me—at once—Heaven-Born!"

Just for a moment the princess had hesitated.

"I—I can't go alone with thee," she had said, but with a light in her eyes, as if she would like to be persuaded that she could.

"Why not?"

"It is against the customs . . ."

"Of the harem! Of course!"

The man had laughed ironically, had grumbled, then, with a shrug of his shoulders, had continued:

"It is against my orders. But thou art the Princess Aziza Nurmahal, the ruler of this land, and, if thou dost insist, take a servant along—one servant—perhaps this little slave girl?"

"No. I shall take my chief eunuch!"

"Good. That should be enough to guard even as lacy and twisted a thing as Tamerlani propriety and Tamerlani etiquette. But—thou must hurry. Why? Who am I to know, Heaven-Born? I am only a rough Afghan executing the orders he gave me. Come—and tell that little ball of quivering, soft nothings over there"—indicating the slave girl who was trying to catch a word now and then—"to be silent about the whole affair—silent as the sands."

The princess had spoken to the slave, enjoining her to secrecy, had left, and had returned, shortly afterwards, veiled from head to foot in a swathing, dis-

figuring black horsehair *ferauj,* and accompanied by Mahsud Hakki, the chief eunuch to whom she had evidently confided the story of the mysterious summons; for the Nubian was laughing with a great flash of even, white teeth and waving a plum-colored paw at the Afghan in hearty greeting.

"Many, many moons have I longed for the sight of the Hajji Akh—"

"Silence, babbler!" had come the Afghan's rough, angry interruption. "Walls have ears—and so have" —he had walked up to the slave girl and had shaken her—"so have little, soft, downy things! Little, soft, downy things that will have their ears cut off if they babble and blab!"

Then all three had left, leaving the harem by a back stairway that led to the kitchen and was hardly ever used this time of the day, down to a small, walled garden heavy with the acrid scent of marigold and the pungent sweetness of red jessamine, thence by an underground passage known only to a few that, running for nearly a mile, opened, through a grass covered, intricate trap door, into a curious congeries of houses not far from the Ghulan River, within sight of the dead Ameer's mausoleum—the combined Hell's Kitchen, Rue de Venise, and Pimlico of the capital, the hiding-place of those who were in distress, and in debt, and in trouble of every kind; a place where brawling and bibbing of forbidden spirits and murder were the order of the day; where vice ran freely in and out of a dozen painted doors, where the pungent fumes of the Black Smoke rose nightly in morose spirals, where recklessness dwelt side by side with

shame, and shame with disease . . . the slums of Tamerlanistan—the mildewed spot in the healthy plant of the town.

Thus Afghan, eunuch, and princess had left the sheltered security of the palace, the latter's heart beating like the heart of a girl in finishing school who, for the first time in her life, unchaperoned, unbeknown to parents and teachers, goes to a matinée with a member of the male sex; while the little slave girl had looked after them in a mixture of curiosity and trepidation, but obeying the injunction of silence and secrecy which Aziza Nurmahal had put upon her.

The little slave girl had been rather prey to conflicting emotions. For she had overheard some of the Afghan *charpadar's* words, and less hedged in by inhibiting conventions, had been conscious of a faint, marring taint of treachery in the Afghan's hearty words and jovial manner. But she feared the princess' quick tongue—just a shade less than she feared the old nurse's quick hand.

So she had waited, nervously expectant, wishing for the princess' return; and then, two hours later, excited sounds had come from the palace courtyard, cries, and a question peaking out from the turmoil:

"Mahsud! Mahsud Hakki! What has happened—for the love of Allah?"

And Ayesha Zemzem, who had been peacefully dozing over a soothing pipe of yellow Latakia tobacco cut with *dawamesk-hashish,* had jumped up, immediately wide-awake as is the habit of old people, had rushed down the stairs, out to the courtyard, and

had found there, supported by half-a-dozen soldiers and servants, the moaning, blood-covered figure of the chief eunuch.

He had died even as Ayesha Zemzem reached his side; had died, with the words on his frothing lips:

"Aziza Nurmahal—the mausoleum—the Afghan—Hajji Akhbar Khan . . ."

And, with a choked rattling noise in his throat, he had sunk on the ground, one hand flung across his lacerated face as if to ward off Fate.

"Aziza Nurmahal? Hajji Akhbar Khan? The Afghan—*what* Afghan? What is all this blabbing and gabbing?" the old nurse had demanded, looking down at the dead man as if she wanted to shake the answer from his limp body; and, more gently:

"Who murdered thee, faithful old friend? Who . . ."

She had interrupted herself, had turned to the tense, startled crowd of servants and soldiers and courtiers, taking charge of the situation as usual.

"Where is the princess?" she had continued. "Go —somebody—and fetch her. Perhaps she has the key to this *pukka* devil's mystery!"

It was then that Kumar Zaida, the little slave girl who had joined the group, had decided that she must tell what she knew; and she had told about the rough Afghan *charpadar,* how he had come with a mysterious message for the princess, how he had whispered to her, how she herself had not been able to understand every word, but, judging from scraps of

talk here and there, believed that the Afghan had come as a messenger from Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh,* returned from the far places who, it seemed, was awaiting the princess in the mausoleum of the late Ameer, by the banks of the Ghulan River.

"Allah!" Ayesha Zemzem had exclaimed. "A clumsy trap! There is nothing near that part of the river banks except desolation! A trap fit for idiots and unthinking children! And dost thou mean to say, Kumar Zaida, that thou . . . ?"

"Who was I to argue?" the slave girl had defended herself. "The princess ordered me to be silent. The Afghan, too, said it was important that nobody knew about the message or the going. Maybe"—bold and arrogant since she knew that she would get a beating whatever happened—"maybe they did not trust *thee,* old woman . . ."

But her last words had been swallowed in the nurse's furious, high-pitched demand:

"Why didst thou not come to me, fool? Why didst thou not tell me, O daughter of a mangy and very unbeautiful she-pig?"

Flopp!—her bony old hand descended on the girl's bare shoulder; and then came the scene which so boisterously interrupted the prosy business discussion between Hector Wade and Mr. Ezra Warburton, the former dashing off at a thundering gallop, and Ayesha Zemzem raging through the palace like a miniature whirlwind of fury . . . fury suddenly scotched, as she entered the princess' apartment and, looking about her, discovered that the ancient, straight-bladed sword

was not in its accustomed place, nor anywhere else, though she searched the rooms thoroughly.

The ancient sword which had been across the dead Ameer's knees during the funeral procession!

The sword with which Aziza Nurmahal had enforced her will when Koom Khan had spoken mutinous words!

The sword which, according to the tradition of the Gengizkhani family, would mate with the other blade, the one which Hector Wade had found in the lumber room of Dealle Castle and which had been the cause of all his twisted, motley adventures!

The sword with which even at that moment Aziza Nurmahal was defending herself, stabbing and cutting until her slim arms ached and her breath came in short, staccato bursts, while the Afghan *charpadar,* who, with a great, bellowing laugh, had declared himself to be Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, governor of the western marches—"and soon thy husband, little princess, soon the father of thy sons, soon Ameer of Tamerlanistan!"—kept dancing away from her, catching blows and thrusts on his metal-bossed arm shield, without using his own weapon.

"For I do not wish to injure thee, O Moon of Delight! And soon thou wilt be tired with this dancing about and unwomanly wielding of steel. And then I shall gather thee in my arms and carry thee away, and—*ahee!*—but thou shalt find my love strong and I thine sweet!"

Abderrahman Yahiah Khan had no thought for Mahsud Hakki, the eunuch, whom he had cut down as soon as they had entered the mausoleum. The man

had crawled away, mortally injured, doubtless to bleed to death somewhere by the deserted river bank.

And the princess fought on, frightened, in despair, but resolved with all the stubbornness of the Gengizkhani blood to die rather than submit, the point of her sword dancing in ever weakening circles, while, back in the palace, the old nurse raised lean arms to heaven.

"By Allah and by Allah!" the nurse exclaimed. "The little princess has more sense than I thought! Enough sense, at least, to have taken along the Luck of the Gengizkhani—and if Al Nakia reaches there in time, both ancient blades will sing the song of blood together. Wooing indeed! Mating indeed! As swords and men and women should mate—in battle! Perhaps"—she whispered—"perhaps it is not too late . . ."

And she sank on her knees, facing Mecca, and cried as if her heart would break, and prayed, fervently:

"Against the night when it overtaketh me, and against the black lust of the wicked and the bad, I betake me for refuge to Allah, the Lord of Daybreak! O Allah, speed Thou Al Nakia's horse! O Allah, listen Thou to the prayer of this foolish old woman! O Allah, do Thou protect and save the little princess who is to me like the light of a friendly house in the screaming night of storms—who is the cradle of my soul—who is the inner jewel in the shrine of my withered heart!"

Thus the prayer on Ayesha Zemzem's lips; and a prayer, too, was in the heart of Hector Wade as he

rode through the streets of the town, scattering the haggling market throngs, driving some into doorways and coffee houses and mosques, causing others to snap their fingers rapidly to ward off evil spirits; for, assuredly, Al Nakia had lost the light of his reason. He, the strong, the gentle, the just, to graze a little playing child in the fury of his gallop, causing it to cry and sob and run, frightened, to its mother—he, the sober, the sane, the patient, to leap his horse across a lumbering ox cart that was not quick enough to get out of his way!

"By the Prophet!" said an old market woman, pityingly, "the stars in his soul have turned black! Madness is upon him!"

And, superstitiously, she touched the little blue-enameled "hand of Ali" she wore in her flat bosom, while Hector thundered on, twisting and turning through the twisting, turning streets, toward the baroque mass of the mausoleum that loomed up in the distance. On!—though his horse was ready to give up, its head bowed on its heaving, lathering chest, the lungs pumping the hot air painfully with a deep, rattling noise.

But he bent over the animal's neck, lifting it with every stride.

They stared after him, the men of Tamerlanistan, some angry, some mocking, some astonished; then, presently, as the tale of the trap into which Aziza Nurmahal had fallen drifted out of the palace on the servants' babbling lips and was repeated from mouth to mouth, in bazaar and mosque and caravanserai, there were expressions of sympathy and pity;

and there was more than one, peasant and noble, merchant and green-turbaned, wide-stepping *shareef,* who threw leg across saddle and was off after Al Nakia's flying figure to help.

But they did not catch up with him, who was riding as he had never ridden before, his left hand twisted in the horse's braided mane after the rein had broken under the strain and the surcingle was beginning to split, sliding the huge saddle to a dangerous angle.

On!—past bazaar and mosque and scarlet-flaming garden, with the gray dust swirling up in spirals, and doorways and posterns echoing the *click-click-click-etty-click* of the horse's feet; straight through a kafila of shaggy, northern dromedaries dragging along their loads over the cobble-stoned pavement, scattering on the market-place a desert man's impromptu camp fire, frightening the tiny donkeys that tripped under their burdens of charcoal and fiery-colored vegetables and onyx-eyed Persian pussy cats, pirouetting dangerously amongst the two-wheeled country carts that cluttered the *souk!*

Off and away!—kicking loose his feet from his stirrups and letting the saddle drop to the ground from underneath him, as girth and surcingle burst completely, jerking the horse to one side so that its frantic feet did not strike the saddle's horn nor become entangled in the leathers, and riding the animal bareback, sitting tight and hard on the high-peaked withers.

The ancient Oriental blade was in his hand as he jumped from the horse and rushed through the open door of the mausoleum.

"Aziza! Aziza Nurmahal!"

His call echoed through the vaulted, white-stuccoed halls where slept the princess' ancestors, from the rough shepherd who, followed by a few thousand yellow-skinned, high-cheeked men on horseback, had swept out of Central Asia, conquering the world from Pekin to the gates of Berlin, to the last male member of the Gengizkhani clan, the princess' father, who had spent a life-time sidestepping the financial traps, the "concessions," of these same Occidentals whom once his ancestors had subjugated and ruled with rope and flame and scimitar.

The ironic thought flashed through Hector's mind even as, from an inner chamber, came an answering call:

"Thank Allah!"

Then hysterical laughter; a man's acrid curse; a clanking of steel against steel—and Hector reached the chamber whence the cry had come, took in the scene at a glance—the girl, weakened, out of breath, but still pluckily defending herself against Abderrahman Yahiah Khan—and he was at him, the point of his weapon dancing before him like a lambent flame.

Up till this moment Abderrahman Yahiah Khan had been merely playing with the princess; had not wished to do her a bodily injury. Perhaps, now, suddenly, his love for her—for love it was, though rough, boisterous, cruel—turned into the primitive desire of primitive man that she, who could not be his, should never belong to anybody else, chiefly not to this upstart of a saheb who, according to Koom Khan's tale, had gained her love and was aspiring to the throne.

Perhaps, thus, for a passing moment, he made up his mind to kill her. Heretofore, he had not used his sword, had only defended himself with his metal-bossed arm shield.

Now he was about to draw . . .

But, by this time, Hector's weapon was approaching him in dancing, narrowing circles, while the princess, regaining her flagging strength, was about to thrust in and under his skillfully handled shield. He heard the ominous crackle of steel from both sides, both blades flickered toward his heart like messengers of death, the hilt of his own sword, when he tried to draw, caught in the folds of his voluminous waist shawl; and so, suddenly, but serenely, he did what most Asiatics would have done under the circumstances.

Fight the inevitable?

And what price was there in that, what pride, what logic? Was there price and pride and logic in one's own bleeding, mutilated corpse? Was there not far greater price and pride and logic in one's living body, though it be humbled through the stress of circumstance—of *force majeure?*

Why—outside, on the banks of the Ghulan River, the köil-birds were singing their throaty song of life and love; the little, green ceratrophys toads were sounding their basso notes; the very trees were alive with the breeze of spring, and the sky was blue and endless . . . Life, all around him!

Why then choose death?

Not he!

And so, skillfully, suddenly, just as the blades met

above his head, he ducked, sat down quickly on the ground, kowtowed, and remarked, without the slightest taint of shame or self-consciousness:

"It appears that I am vanquished. I am thy slave, Al Nakia—and thine, Aziza Nurmahal!"

With which he groped in his waist shawl, drew out a match and a sadly crumpled cigarette, lit it, and remarked, to nobody in particular, that even to the noblest of men *kismet* was always *kismet,* and that all came from Allah, the good as well as the evil.

"Thus—let us not cavil at the evil! It would be blasphemy unspeakable!"

Hector dropped the point of his sword. He laughed, frankly, loudly. He could not help himself. The governor's effrontery was too colossal.

Then, again, as he looked at the princess, as he saw the delicate splendor of her face, the warm golden tint of her skin, the magnificent curve of breast and hip for all her slimness, the long, narrow, pleasurable hands, and the huge eyes which shone like star-sapphires; as he saw her firm, red lips, those lips that held the eternal invitation of all womankind; together with a curious, rather impersonal kind of jealousy, since he did not love her, a great rage rose in his throat that the other should have thought of making her his.

And again he raised his sword, to the little princess' encouraging shouts of "Kill him, Al Nakia! Kill him!" while Abderrahman Yahiah Khan sighed resignedly, rather pathetically, with an expression in his eyes, his lips, the drooping of his shoulders which

seemed to say that Hector was taking an unfair advantage of him and that it was thus his right to feel hurt and abused.

For be it remembered that he was an Oriental; not the type of Eastern potentate one sees so much in England and occasionally in New York, flashing the motley silk of his turban through the gray, stony thoroughfares of the West, a man spoilt in a way yet bred to the most delicate finesse of feelings and manners and emotions; but that he, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, was an Oriental born and bred in the gutters of some reeking bazaar, who had lived the haphazard life of Eastern childhood with no lessons except those of his ancient race, the crooked, crowded streets, and once in a while a word of meaningless Koranic wisdom from the lips of some supercilious graybeard. When he had reached his twelfth year, manhood had come to him—sudden and a little cruel, as it comes to the children of Asia—and with it both the passions and the responsibilities of manhood. Hereafter he had had to make his own way—his own way compared to which that of a New York newsboy is a path of roses, since the West holds firm to that weakening philosophy called sympathy of which the East knows nothing and wants less—through the strength of his brain and his body, every step on the ladder of success marked by the blood and sufferings of some one weaker than himself, until to-day he was what he was—shrewd, but callous; a man whose enthusiasm was without warmth, whose brutality without imagination, whose passion without delicacy, whose submission without shame.

And, without shame, he looked up at Al Nakia, and, using the Oriental metaphor which corresponds to the plain English advice not to make a fool of himself, he said:

"Al Nakia—remember: 'He of great head becomes a king, he of great feet a shepherd!' What wouldst thou gain by killing me? Once I am dead, thy rage will be spent, and what profit then to thee, Heaven-Born? To kill means but a momentary revenge—and what gain is there in that?"

"The gain that I know thee to be dead—that never again thou wilt be able to make mischief!"

"Better far to grant me life—*and* to trust me!"

"Trust—thee?" Hector was utterly amazed.

"I am shrewd, Al Nakia."

"Granted," said Hector, curious what was to come next.

"I know this country, every inch of it, chiefly the western marches."

"Thou dost, assuredly."

"I have at my command my own troops, too, the men of Musa Al-Mutasim."

"Precisely."

"I have a large store of rifles and ammunition."

"So I've heard."

"Higgins saheb and the other saheb are at my headquarters."

"Exactly!" rejoined Hector, who was getting impatient. "Thou art a traitor, and now thou art in my hands, as powerless as a trapped jackal, and . . ."

"Heaven-Born! Heaven-Born!" exclaimed the governor, shaking a finger as he might at a recalcitrant

child. "If I were powerful and swore fealty to thee, thou wouldst be right in not trusting me. For, powerful, I would strive for yet more power, would try to usurp thy place—as I did in the past. But, shorn of my power, in thy hands, under the heel of thy mercy, thus deprived of everything except what thou wouldst grant me, I should be forced to be loyal to thee through self-defense!"

"Look here," began Hector who, in his honest British way, was more indignant at the man's Jesuitic casuistry of reasoning than at his treachery.

But the governor continued, very gently:

"Grant me life, Heaven-Born, and I shall pay for it a thousand times over. For I love life and what life brings." Here he winked, shamelessly, at the princess who, Oriental to the marrow, was beginning to admire, even respect, the man's enormous, serene astuteness. "Grant me life, and then fortune will come to thy hand, unasked, like a courtezan—or a dog."

And it was racially, culturally typical of Aziza Nurmahal that she, who at first had been more intent upon the man's instant death than Hector Wade, was also first to forget her hatred the moment she understood that he would be more valuable to her alive than dead—an instance of that Oriental unmorality which, at times, turns out to be decidedly more constructive and humane than the case-hardened prejudices, virtues, and ethics of the moral-ridden Occident.

Seeing Hector hesitate, she took charge of the situation.

"I grant thee life, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan," she said. "Tell me. How wilt thou pay for it?"

"How?" smiled the governor, rising; and, hereafter, he disregarded Hector completely, and addressed himself directly to the princess. *"Ahee!* Thou art indeed of the blood of the Gengizkhani, twin sister to the gray-wolf, and thou wilt appreciate my shrewdness —*and* my loyalty!"

And he proceeded to sketch a naïvely brutal plan by the help of which he would, in payment for his life "and a few minor things of which I shall talk presently, when thy heart, O Aziza Nurmahal, is less bloated with evil and bitter thoughts against me," change sides. He would turn over his military establishment, including Musa Al-Mutasim's choice gang of ruffians and the rifles and ammunition which Mr. Preserved Higgins had given him, to the Tamerlanistan government, surrender the Cockney and the other saheb:

". . . to be severely dealt with as, by Allah, they deserve! And, henceforth, I shall become a law-abiding citizen and a stout pillar of the state. It will be easy. A word from me to my captains will be sufficient. As to Musa Al-Mutasim, it may be advisable to have his head cut off. Thus," he added, piously, "shall we all be happy and contented and save much blood. And"—he smiled, vulpinely—"Higgins saheb and the other saheb and perhaps Musa Al-Mutasim will pay, and then everything will be as Allah willeth."

"Good, good!" cried the princess, to whose eastern brain all this seemed supreme logic and wisdom; and

even Hector, while not admitting the logic, had to admit the wisdom, and though at first he had been shocked at the enormous, serenely unblushing unmorality of the project, he understood that after all it would be the right thing to accept it. He saw that, automatically, it would spell the end of all turmoil and once more bring back to Tamerlanistan its old peace and prosperity.

Therefore, when shortly afterwards a troop of Tamerlani soldiers and *naibs* drew rein at the mausoleum and invaded the place, sword in hand, threatening revenge against the treacherous governor of the western marches, Hector stepped between them and their intended victim, and asked them to take the man to the palace and to see that no harm came to him.

"No harm indeed!" echoed the governor to his twin brother and worst enemy, the governor of the eastern marches, who was amongst the crowd and had already raised his short, wicked sword. "Back to thy kennel, O dog, unbeautiful and decidedly objectionable, or I shall torture thee the torture of the boiling oil! For behold, O thou fetid hyena, I am in high favor with the princess and Al Nakia—because of my wisdom, my courage, my clean manliness, and my shining loyalty!"

And he strutted out with a considerable swagger, followed by the astonished Tamerlanis, while Hector Wade, laughing in spite of himself, turned quickly as he heard the princess' whispered words:

"The blades! The ancient blades! The blade of

the East and that of the West! Thy blade and mine, Al Nakia! The blades of the prophecy—which saved me—which saved Tamerlanistan!"

And then, realizing that here for the first time since he had come to Tamerlanistan he was alone with the princess without hidden eyes and ears watching and listening from behind the rustling zenana curtains, that here for the first time he had a chance to ask her straight out for a solution of the mystery, Hector demanded, rather bluntly:

"Tell me, Aziza. What is all this mad talk of blades and the wooing of blades? What is this ancient prophecy to which all the world seems to have the key except myself?"

She looked up, utterly astonished.

"Thou dost not know?"

"I have guessed, a little. But—well—I don't know."

"Then why didst thou come here? Why didst thou sacrifice thy life, thy strength, thy energy, for this land, for me? If thou wert in love with me—which thou art not . . ."

"Which indeed I am not," smiled Hector, "though I am thy friend."

"And I thine. The best friend in the world—friend closer than a brother . . ."

"Rather!" said Hector to himself, thinking, bitterly, of his brother Tollemache, for whose sake he had taken on his shoulders the burden of dishonor; while the princess continued:

"Yes. We are friends. But—even so—why didst thou come here in the first place? What, if thou

knowest nothing of the prophecy of the swords, made thee leave thy own country? What made thee come to India, to the house in the Colootallah? And by what right hast thou *this* in thy possession?"—touching the sword which rode at his hip.

"By what right hast thou the sword of the Gengiz-khani, the sword of my clan?" Her eyes flashed fire. Her narrow hands opened and shut spasmodically. Her voice rose to a minatory treble, with that sudden, killing, unreasonable burst of temper which is the heritage of Arab blood. "I—I *am* thy friend! But if that which is whispered in the western marches is true—if, indeed, thou art an impostor, and not Al Nakia, not the 'Expected One'—then I shall . . ."

Hector cut through her words with a sharp gesture. He smiled, rather ruefully, and assured her that he had come into possession of the blade honestly enough, that it had been amongst the heirlooms of his family, and that, ever since he could remember, it had had a curious influence over him . . .

"As if this bit of steel had a soul!" Easily, naturally, unself-consciously, he expressed in Persian the things which inhibition of race and training would have made impossible for him in English. "When I held the blade in my hand, even when I was a small boy, wings from the past, serene and gigantic and compelling, seemed to bear me toward an ancient destiny. It seemed as if the blade would cut through the tangled web of all my doubts and riddles and sorrows of life—would help me to recover something very precious which I had lost . . . something . . ."

He interrupted himself.

"I am expressing myself crudely," he said. "I can't tell what . . ."

"I understand!" Aziza Nurmahal slipped her hand into his. "Thou *art* the 'Expected One!' Tell me—everything!"

And he told her how, according to the traditions of the Wades of Dealle, he had been forced to shoulder the guilt of his older brother, had left his father's house taking nothing with him except the blade; and he went on until he came to the curious advertisement in the newspaper, the offer to buy swords at fair prices, and the even more curious figure of the old Oriental dealer in Coal Yard Street, off Drury Lane.

"What did this old Oriental look like?" she asked; and Hector described him as well as he could, adding that he bore a curious resemblance to the Tamerlani merchant in Calcutta at whose house he had first met her.

"Might have been his brother—they looked so much alike," he wound up.

"Indeed!" laughed the princess. "For they *are* brothers. The man to whom you took the blade is Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh,* my father's most trusted friend, who went to the far places to . . ."

"To do what?"

"To hunt for the sword of the Gengizkhani. To find a descendant of that Englishman to whom once the sword was given, by my ancestor, centuries ago. To find *thee,* O Al Nakia, O Truly Expected One. To prove the truth of the old prophecy, when it ap-

peared that my father was on his death bed and the land would be left in my weak hands. To prove, too, that blood is thicker than the clogging dust of the centuries, and that Allah does not bring two human souls together in sport, to whirl them apart again as the sand storm whirls the yellow grains of the desert!

"The prophecy?" she went on. "The prophecy of the blades which thou dost not know in thy mind, but which thou knowest in thy soul? Listen! Thou, who camest out of the West, heeding the silent call which drew thee to the East—thine own East! For cousin thou art to me. Thou, too, hast Gengizkhani blood in thy veins, the blood of the ancient, undying race, and thou showest it in this—and that—and this!" indicating his high cheek bones, his black, curly hair, his aquiline nose with the nervous, flaring nostrils which, according to Sussex tradition, had been the racial inheritance of some Spanish sailor shipwrecked on England's white cliffs in the days of the Armada and Good Queen Bess.

"Cousin to me!" she repeated, with a little lilt in her voice, like the lilt of an old, sweet song.

And she told him how her own people, the Gengizkhani, the descendants of Genghiz Khan the Great on the male and of the Prophet Mohammed on the female side, had once ruled all Central Asia, from the Outer Mongolian snows to the scorched plains of Rajputana, from Anatolia to Chinese Turkestan, from the painted gates of Moscow to the ragged basalt frontier of Siam and Amoy; how they had fought hard to conquer, harder yet to hold their

princely inheritance, and how amongst the many adventurers who left Europe for Asia in search of excitement and treasure, there had been a young Englishman.

He became an officer in the army of the Gengizkhani Ameer, whose name was Jaffar Sirajud-din, finally rising to the rank of captain-general, but there were bitter words when he fell in love with the Ameer's youngest daughter, Khadijah Sultana.

There was a fight, a duel; English blade against Tamerlani blade. The Ameer was vanquished and, prostrate on the ground, the point of the other's weapon flickering above his heart, he agreed to the marriage.

But, since Khadijah Sultana had been won in battle, instead of an exchange of rings, there was an exchange of swords.

Shortly after the birth of her little son, the princess died. The Englishman took the child, and returned to his native country; and the prophecy said that, before he left, he swore a most solemn oath to the Ameer that whenever a Gengizkhani needed the sword of his English cousins, the latter must obey the summons.

But, back here in the heart of Asia, in the course of the centuries, while they remembered the prophecy itself, the ancient prophecy which said that, in the Gengizkhani's hour of need, a man would come out of the West, in his hand the blade of Jaffar Sirajud-din, they had forgotten the name of the Englishman and his family. All they had to link them with the past was the Englishman's sword, the one with which

he had vanquished the Ameer and conquered his bride, with its escutcheon engraved on the hilt, and a description of the Gengizkhani sword which the foreigner had taken with him.

When Aziza Nurmahal's father was on his deathbed, Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh,* understood that there would be trouble with the Europeans begging and bribing and bullying for "concessions," with none left of the old clan except a young girl unused to the intrigues of the palace, the mosques, and the bazaars, with the land sure to be torn by civil strife unless a strong man's hand took the helm of the ship of state.

Thus the Hajji had gone to the far places, to Europe, to England, on his mad search for the possessor of the Gengizkhani blade.

"And he found thee, Al Nakia!" the princess wound up.

"Yes! He found me! And I found him. I found—all that—yonder!"

He pointed to where, under the rays of the sun, the flat, white roofs of the capital poured to the dip of the river, while, farther east, a chain of hills rose in even tiers, sharp and terse, then softened marvelously until, in the farthest east, they curved inward like a bay of darkness, stretched out into a high tableland, and soared into two cube-shaped granite hills which looked like the pillars of a gigantic gate.

The gate of this far Central Asian land which had called to him with the call of the blood!

The call of the ancient centuries, the mysterious, atavistic energy which, more even than the sword of

the Gengizkhani, had driven him across the world!

English out of Sussex he was. Yet this land, too, was his! This land—and its destinies!

Instinctively, he had taken the princess' hand. Now he dropped it, letting the softly clinging fingers slip from his own, as, clear through the other thoughts, cut a minor thought, disturbing, disconcerting.

"Why didn't the Hajji explain the prophecy to me?" he asked. "Why did he let me go—oh—blindfolded?"

The princess shook her head.

"I don't know, Al Nakia," she replied. "But, doubtless, his reasons were good and wise. Whatever they were, they were just. For, always, has the lamp of his knowledge made clear the path from hearthstone to byre. And to-day—see!—the prophecy of my clan has been fulfilled, all but . . ." she smiled a little self-consciously, slurred and stopped.

Hector, too, smiled—a frankly boyish smile.

"Thou meanest that about the—wooing of the swords?"

"Yes."

"Too bad," he rejoined, uncompromisingly English for all his Persian phraseology. "Too bad that thy heart, Aziza Nurmahal, and mine are not hushed in the same sweet dream, that my heaven is not fulfilled in thy soul and body, nor thy heaven in mine."

"Then," asked the princess, just a little mischievously, "thou lovest—somebody else?"

"Yes," replied Hector, thinking of Jane.

"And so do I!" said the princess, thinking of the stranger who had stared at her, bold, unashamed, that day in the bazaar.

And they sighed and looked at each other, rather like two sentimental children, unhappy, yet, somehow, more pleased than otherwise at their own unhappiness, and left the mausoleum; and they returned through the streets of the town, acclaimed by peasant and noble, by merchant and priest, back to the palace whose turrets and domes burned under the rays of the late afternoon sun like the plumage of a gigantic peacock, in every mysterious blend of blue and green and purple.

As usual, the outer courtyard was a warren of teeming humanity and humanity's wives and children and mothers-in-law and visiting country cousins: *saises* and grass cutters, cooks and courtiers and *mahajuns* and paunchy assistants of Gulabian, villagers from the countryside come to present a petition or to call on friend and relative in the palace service, desert men who had brought the slim taxes of the farther lands, wealthy *thakur sahebs,* landed gentlemen, in immaculate white and immense turbans, Babus fondly hugging huge account books bound in soft Bokhara leather, sellers of shawls and perfumes, of Persian brocade and gold-threaded Fyzabad muslin and all the many other things which are bought by the women of the harem; all talking, laughing excitedly . . . raising shrill voices of welcome as the princess, by Hector's side, passed through the gate,

with Gulabian's tall fur cap bobbing up and down as he made salaam after salaam, and the old nurse acting as a sort of impromptu choir leader.

"*Alhamdulillah!*" she cried. "Thou hast come back to us, O Aziza Nurmahal, O great soul of my little and worthless soul! Thou hast touched with the flame of thy return the lightless lamp of my sorrow!

"And thou, O Al Nakia"—turning to Hector and clutching him in a bony embrace—"thou hast blown away the dead leaves that flitted in the wind of my grief! Thou art the sunshine that trickles through the patter of the gray rain. Thou . . ."

She turned and faced Babu Chandra, who was plucking at her sleeve:

"What is it, O he-goat?"

The Babu overlooked the insult and addressed himself direct to Hector, speaking in that chaos of murdered English slang that, since he *was* a Babu, was as dear to him as the crimson caste mark on his forehead.

"Saheb!" he said. "Regret to report that Warburton saheb had to leave in regular old whirlwind of a hurry."

"That so?" asked Hector, who had forgotten all about the American.

"Yes. His daughter has been jolly well copped by no end of jolly, fat old ruffian—right-oh!" said Chandra, with the self-conscious pride and satisfaction peculiar to the bearers of bad tidings.

CHAPTER XVI

In which a fat Arab, called "The Basin," plays Cupid.

THE Babu's tale was substantially the same which he had told Mr. Warburton and which had caused the latter to rush out of the audience hall and straddle the first horse he saw in the palace courtyard.

One of the *tofanghees,* the irregular soldiers, who had been left behind as a body-guard for Jane at the little village not far from the capital, had ridden into town with the news that the fat Afghan *charpadar* who, with his lean companion, had joined the caravan a day or two earlier, had returned to the village atop a swift dromedary. He had talked to Jane Warburton; then, suddenly, had dismounted, had picked her up and lifted her into the saddle, and, in spite of his immense bulk, had vaulted up behind her, using the dromedary's tail as a handle in true desert style, and had been off at a gallop.

Of course, the *tofanghees* had not been able to shoot, afraid they might hit the girl, but half-a-dozen of them had started in pursuit.

Thus the Babu's tale, told with a beatific smile and a conscious stressing and straining of dramatic high spots, and, momentarily, Hector Wade came near to fainting. It seemed to him as if he were sinking into a cushion of air.

His senses reeled as he pictured it all: the girl he loved—the rough Afghan *charpadar* who had kidnaped her—the . . .

No, no!

For a moment, subconsciously, as much out of pity and love for the girl as pity for himself, he tried to force the conviction on his mind that the reality could not be half as bad, as appalling, as dreadfully anguishing, as the fantastic terrors of his imagination. Later on, thinking of the experience, he would say that during that minute his heart was pierced with all the accumulated sufferings of humanity since first God and the Devil fought over the soul of Cain.

Jane—Jane Warburton—at the mercy of an Afghan *charpadar,* a lawless hillman who brooked no master except his own passion, his own greed, his own cruelty!

In the midst of all that eddying swirl of teeming, turbaned humanity who, sensing the tragedy, looked at him, some with sympathy, some with wonder, others, the majority, with frank curiosity, he felt utterly alone—racially alone, than which there is no worse loneliness in all the world.

A sharp pain tugged at his heart. His knees tottered. The low-dipping sun seemed to swing to and fro in a blazing brownish-yellow pendulum. A flood of red color with broad, interlacing veins floated before his eyes.

Again—and, being a strong man, physically, and unconsciously proud of the fact, he was ashamed even as he realized it—he came near to fainting; and then,

unmindful of the staring crowd, the princess put her slight arms about him.

"Al Nakia," she whispered, "cousin mine—tell me! This foreign girl of whom the Babu spoke—is she . . . ?"

Hector inclined his head without speaking. Dry eyed, vacant eyed, he stared at his feet.

"Cousin—cousin mine!"

Aziza Nurmahal did not say what she was going to say, perhaps did not know what she was going to say. She could not speak. Sympathy? To be sure, she felt sympathy with Hector. But she was too Oriental to attempt the impossible which a European would have tried: to grapple with another human's sentiments; to pronounce words of condolence or pity.

It would have seemed indelicate to her. For, in her psychology, grief and sorrow and pain were harsh things, lonely, cut-off things—invisible units of Fate which every man must bear alone, which no man can share; and typically Oriental, too, was she in her reactions, which were practically always mental, and not, as in a European, emotional.

Thus, when words finally came to her, they were soberly practical and constructive.

"The Babu spoke of *two* Afghans, one lean and the other fat. It is a wise thing to draw out the thorn in one's foot with the thorn in one's hand."

"What dost thou mean?" asked Hector.

"That we have one of the—ah—'Afghans' here. The lean one, who turned out to be a Tamerlani, by the name of Abderrahman Yahiah Khan. Let us ask

him about his brother-rogue. Hey—Shikandar!" She turned to a servant. "Fetch me the governor of the western marches!"

Abderrahman Yahiah Khan came, listened, and took in the situation, including its ramified potentialities, at a glance.

Serenely overlooking the detail that, not long before, in the mausoleum, he had been willing and ready to sacrifice Musa Al-Mutasim's head on the altar of his own safety, he now felt hurt and indignant that the Arab, without consulting him, should have kidnaped Warburton saheb's daughter, with evidently not the slightest intention of letting him share in whatever ransom he might be able to extort.

His words, therefore, throbbed with bitterness as well as unfeigned, simon-pure moral shock.

"The fat—what didst thou say, Aziza Nurmaha!—Afghan? Afghan indeed! He is an obese and indecent impostor! He is Musa Al-Mutasim, the renegade Arab who for years has made the western marches unsafe . . ."

"Which thou knowest well, O grandson of abundant filth!" cut in the old nurse, wagging a grimy, threatening thumb.

"Silence, Not-Wanted!" said the governor.

Then, turning to Hector and the princess, the crowd having dispersed at a gesture of the latter, he told them about the ancient Tartar castle named *Jabul-i-Shuhada,* "The Place of the Martyrs," which belonged to the Arab and was his ever-ready place of refuge in case of dire need.

"It is a stout place, easily defended, and can stand a long siege," he went on. "Before Al-Mutasim and I left the western marches he had it put in readiness—originally for me and thee, Aziza Nurmahal, when I, being a foolish man and almost childlike in my impulsiveness . . ."

"Childlike? Thou? Childlike!" screamed Ayesha Zemzem. "By Zubalzan, son of Satan! I . . ."

"Childlike indeed, O Pig's Brain!" came the governor's ready repartee. "Childlike in thinking that I might be able to throw a noose around the far stars of desire and sweetness and beauty—that thou, Aziza, wouldst give me thy love and flood me with it, as the blessed rain floods the thirsty earth, and . . ."

"What about the Arab?" asked Hector, fretting. "Come on. What about him? And what about the Tartar castle? I"—he loosened the blade in its scabbard—"by God, I think that thou art delaying us on purpose with all this talk about . . ."

"Patience, son of a most impatient mother," said Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, gently, "and remember that this same patience is the key of relief—*is-subr miftah il-faraj, yah saheb!* As to the castle, Musa Al-Mutasim is doubtless on his way there."

"Where is it?" asked the princess.

"Ah—a sensible question—where is it? I know where it is, and I shall go there, myself, at the head of a squadron of troopers, and presently we will storm the castle—though it will take weeks—and, with my own hand, in sign of my loyalty, shall I cut that Arab dog's throat from his fat left ear to his fat right ear."

"And what will happen to the girl in the meantime?" demanded Hector.

"Nothing, saheb. See—Musa Al-Mutasim is not as I am"—he smiled, shamelessly, at the princess who, being perversely feminine and as perversely Oriental, liked him better with every word he spoke—"no! he is not as I am, full-blooded, a dallier with the words of love, a drawer of the sword of passion. Passion? By my beard! Gold is his passion—for he is a hoarder of coin, a swollen money bag, a cursed borrower of half-rupees! He only holds the girl for ransom!"

"But . . ."

"But"—continued the governor—"when he sees that there is no gold for him, but a dagger across his throat, he will pipe a different tune. Trust me, saheb, and do not worry. I know that obese son of a thousand devils!"

He walked away, snapping his fingers, well pleased with himself; and it was a proof of the man's eloquence, in a way of the man's greatness, that, for a moment, Hector was persuaded that the scheme was perfectly feasible, that, with the exception of certain unavoidable inconveniences, Jane Warburton was really safe, and it took the old nurse to see the flaw in the argument.

"Fool!" she shouted after Abderrahman Yahiah Khan's retreating back. "A blind fool, filling the lap of the morning wind with seventy times seventy bundles of empty vaporings! For"—she turned to Hector—"consider! Will Musa Al-Mutasim spare the girl when he sees that he is lost?"

"Why . . ."

At once Hector understood, and he felt again that terrible sensation of faintness when, amidst the shouts of the servants that crowded the outer gate, three people entered the courtyard, and he saw, to his unspeakable joy and amazement, that it was Jane, accompanied by her father and by a gigantic figure of a man whom the old nurse, with a shrill scream, greeted as:

"Musa Al-Mutasim! By the red pig's bristles! Musa Al-Mutasim!"

Hector did not hear the last words. He heard nothing, saw nothing except Jane; and, forgetting the crowd that watched curiously from the gate, forgetting the princess, the nurse, the Arab, and Mr. Ezra Warburton, he rushed up to her and took her in his arms.

"My dear—oh, my dear . . ."

He stammered. English to the core he was, for all his strain of Tamerlani blood which bound his destiny with that of Asia, and English, too, was his love, lean, wiry, strong, a little hard. But, as he held her to him, close, the love he bore her swept over him with an overwhelming force and sweetness, and he did not have to use Cambuscan's Mirror to tell him that his love was returned.

She kissed him full on the lips.

Then she laughed.

"Hector," she said, "I *am* surprised at you. This isn't the correct way to propose to a girl—nor exactly the correct place!"

"I don't care," laughed Hector. "I'm never going

to be correct again as long as I live!"—and he kissed her, very much to the delight of the old nurse who, remembering a lover of her youth, a Rajput with split beard and hooded eyes and a sprig of jessamine behind his ear who had drifted across the Himalayas into Central Asia, broke into a high-pitched Indian love song:

"As the sugar cane has a sweeter taste,
Knot after knot from the top,
Even thus is the sweetness of thy body, beloved,
Each time thou givest it to me . . ."

And, in the exuberance of her emotion, she threw her bony arms around Mr. Warburton's neck and kissed him smackingly on the lips. The financier, embarrassed, indignant, would doubtless have been even more indignant had he been able to understand the words of her song, as she continued:

"For thy body, beloved,
Is a garden of strange and lascivious flowers
Which I gather in the night . . ."

By this time Musa Al-Mutasim, who had enjoyed to the full the sensation which his arrival had caused, had salaamed before the princess with outstretched hands.

"I am in the shade of thy little white feet," he said, with that rather grandiose and irresistible hypocrisy which is the Arab's birthright as much as passion and greed, "and my sword is thine and my manhood and my loyalty and my strength!"

Words which, given Musa Al-Mutasim's reputation

as a robber and murderer and border raider and all-round "bad man," served only to increase the sensation his arrival had caused.

Even the princess, an Oriental herself, thus used to the, to a European forever inexplicable, but in reality quite logical, turns and twists of Asiatic reasoning, looked puzzled.

"Thy sword?" she demanded. "Thy loyalty and strength and manhood? And what then would I do with them, O thou great and shameless thief?"

"Behold!" said the Arab, with a magnificent gesture, "I give them all to thee!"

"Gidar rakhe mans ke thati"—Ayesha Zemzem cut in—"who would keep meat on trust with a jackal?"

"A wise man would," retorted the robber.

"What? A wise man?"

"Indeed! After he has caused the jackal to be well fed—exceedingly well fed—as I am well fed!" and he produced a silk purse filled to the bursting point with gold.

He went on to explain that, on his way to the Tartar castle, his dromedary had tripped, fallen, broken a leg, and left him helpless in the desert not far from the village. The *tofanghees* who had ridden in pursuit had, in consequence, caught up with him, but had again been afraid to shoot.

"For," he said, "I value life—life which is as uncertain as the trick of the peg to the hand of the unskilled horseman, and so"—naïvely—"I used the foreign girl as a shield—a soft shield, a warm shield, but a strong shield!"

"Wert thou not ashamed of thyself?" asked Aziza Nurmahal, to be met by the counter question:

"Wouldst thou be ashamed to drink when thou art thirsty? *Wah!*"

He shrugged his fat shoulders, and continued.

It appeared that, with the *tofanghees* afraid to shoot and himself unable to for the simple reason that he had no weapon except his short dagger, the situation had reached an *impassé;* and so they had sat there, in the desert, carefully watching each other, the Arab never for a moment releasing his bearlike hold on Jane Warburton, when, riding as he had never ridden before, Mr. Ezra Warburton had arrived on the scene.

He was a business man, first, last, and all the time. At times unreasonable, at other times irritable and nervous, he always emerged from his fits of temper or despondency to be frankly practical.

Thus, seeing his daughter in the Arab's arms, he had at first rushed forward—to be pulled back by one of the *tofanghees,* Mansoor Khan, who spoke a little English and warned him that his daughter's life was at stake.

Then he had hurled a flood of epithets at the other's head which, being in English, affected the Arab as much as a buzzing of flies.

Finally, his business instinct had come to the fore, and he had discovered that the robber, too, was at heart a business man. So, with the *tofanghee* playing interpreter, the two business men had arrived at an agreement, by the terms of which—"a simple matter

of trade," the Arab called it—Mr. Warburton paid a thumping ransom for his daughter.

"He furthermore guaranteed," Musa Al-Mutasim wound up, "that, if I surrendered to the Tamerlanistan authorities, my life would be safe."

What the Arab did not explain was his reasoning for the latter resolve. He did not explain that, never before, had he realized that there was as much money in the world as Mr. Warburton was paying as ransom for his daughter, nor, if there were, that anybody should have as little sense as to pay it out. He had therefore considered Warburton what an American would have called an "easy mark," and had proposed to stick to him, through thick and thin, as a financial prospect far more promising and much less dangerous than border brigandage.

There was of course his former companion in crime, Abderrahman Yahiah Khan; but, very much as the latter had been ready to sacrifice him during the interview with Hector in the mausoleum, so he was willing to sacrifice the governor for his own advantage. In the Orient, at least, it is not true that there is honor amongst thieves—nor, perhaps, in the Occident.

"Aziza Nurmahal," he said; and to Hector, the words sounded suspiciously like those which the governor of the western marches had used, "I have been bad and wicked. Now I have reformed. Command me—"

"To do what?" asked the princess.

"To bring peace to the western marches that—alas!

—too long have been torn by strife and turmoil and" —he said it quite naïvely—"the plundering of the caravans. Say the word, and I myself shall see to it that the armed men under my command join thy service. As to Higgins saheb and the other saheb, the easiest way would be to kill them. For a dead horse does not eat grass, and a dead saheb does not ask for 'concessions.'"

"What about Abderrahman Yahiah Khan?" demanded Hector, with a twinkle in his eye.

"He is a scoundrel," said the Arab. "He is in league with Musboot, the lord of lies and fleas. It is he who led me astray from the right path—the path of virtue—I swear it by my mother's honor! He is . . ."

Quite suddenly, he was silent. His jaws dropped, and, perhaps for the first time in his life, he blushed.

For there in the crowd stood Abderrahman Yahiah Khan, a smile curling his thin lips—a smile that presently changed into a laugh.

The Arab, too, laughed.

"Ho, brother!" he shouted. "Ho, soul of my soul!"—and, without any more ado, they fell in each other's arms.

It was Babu Chandra who, talking to Gulabian that night, put it all in a nutshell.

"If the man be ugly," he said, "what can the mirror do? If a man be a liar, how can we expect truth from him? But even an ugly man has his uses. Even a liar has his uses. I myself," he added, unblushingly, "have been known to lie at times."

CHAPTER XVII

Proving that all's well that ends well.

"FATHER dear," said Jane Warburton, days later, "you are as platitudinously impressive as a Bishop!"

"A remark," rejoined the financier, "which lacks in reverence both to the church and to myself.

"Jane," he said after a pause and, rather, as if the admission hurt him, "you are my only child, and I love you."

"You don't exactly show it, dad!" came the quick reply.

"I show it in my own way."

"Your own way is to . . ."

"To stop you from doing a foolish thing which you'd regret sooner or later."

"One never regrets love, dad!"

"One does, too!"

And, for the tenth time, Mr. Warburton reiterated his objections to the marriage of his daughter and Hector Wade.

Mr. Ezra Warburton was a manly man—what is called so in lieu of a better term—who had always been in the habit of considering his daughter's sex as rather an indelicate intrusion into his business life—which was his whole life. Of course he loved her,

loved her dearly, but the fact that she was a girl and not a boy somehow rankled; it was the only thing for which he had ever blamed his dead wife. Even then he would not have minded it so much, had not Jane, at an early age, exhibited certain man-like characteristics, chiefly a decisive and stubborn independence, which he would have admired in a son, but which irritated him in a daughter; the more so as Jane, with either conscious or unconscious cleverness, used her strictly feminine characteristics to back up and reënforce her masculine qualities—tempering steel with diamond, as it were—a combination which Mr. Warburton found it hard to combat.

The result was that she usually had her own way; and a further result was chromatic friction. As a rule, at least in minor matters, this friction was allayed by Mr. Warburton giving in, but in more important matters he acted differently at times, and showed a stubbornness which fully equaled hers.

He did so now, as he repeated that, even supposing that Hector had been innocently accused of cheating at cards, even granting that he had made a splendid success as *de facto* regent of Tamerlanistan, the fact of the old scandal which had driven him from England still existed, and could not be overlooked.

"What difference does that make?" demanded Jane. "He lives here—and not in England. He's through with Mayfair and Belgravia and the Horse Guards Barracks!"

"The greater his success here, the more his enemies . . ."

"He has no enemies—no personal enemies!"

"He *will* have *pro rata* with his success. Yes—the greater his success here, the more his enemies will dig into his past, and make capital out of the old scandal. And, sooner or later, he is bound to visit England. Chiefly if he marries you. You don't want to stay in Tamerlanistan all the rest of your natural life!"

And then he reminded her of her old promise not to marry Hector Wade until the latter had completely cleared his name.

Hector, when appealed to by Jane, agreed with Mr. Warburton.

He did not know what it was: either the subtle influence of the fatalistic Orient, or a deep conviction in his own heart; but, somehow, he felt absolutely sure that, sooner or later, the stigma and taint that marred his name would be removed.

"Why are you so sure?" asked Jane. "Have you heard from home? Has your brother confessed perhaps?" For, by this time, though Hector, faithful to the promise he had given his father, had not given her any explanation of the affair, she, putting two and two together, had made to herself a pretty clear picture of what had happened. "Or has your father . . . ?"

"No, dear. It's something different. You see, I'm not a religious man—what goes under the name of religion, what? But I have a certain belief in the everlasting squareness and decency of—oh, you know—things!"

"Things!" mimicked Jane. "You are an inarticulate old dear, and I'm afraid you'll be a most unsatisfactory lover!"

"No, I won't!" he said, boyishly, just a little hurt. "And that's just what I mean. Love! You see, love is the greatest force in the world, and I do love you, heart and soul and body, and every last, deepest, finest, most secret thought in me. And—why—it's bound to come out all right—don't you see—sooner or later!"

"Yes," murmured Jane, "it's bound to come out all right!"

It did, rather sooner than Hector expected; and it began, not many weeks afterwards, with the governor of the western marches entering the audience hall arm in arm with Musa Al-Mutasim, and proclaiming, with a great deal of self-righteousness, that—by the red pig's bristles!—he had now proved once and for all his loyalty which, so it appeared, glistened in his soul as "the early rays of the young sun glisten in the tree tops of a staunch forest, O Aziza Nurmahal!"

With which and, too, with a triumphant side glance at his twin brother and worst enemy, the governor of the eastern marches, he related that the confidential messengers whom he had despatched to his headquarters in the western province had returned, that his and Musa Al-Mutasim's armies had sworn fealty to the established government, and that even now a picked squadron under the command of Koom Khan was on the way, with the two sahebs as prisoners, to be dealt with as they deserved.

"As they deserve, by the horns of the Archangel Ashrafeel!" echoed the Arab, winking significantly at Wahab al-Shaitan, the chief executioner.

Three days later, amidst great excitement that spread from the streets and bazaars and mosques, where the cries of the populace were like a noise of a distant sea ebbing and flowing and whirling and eddying in regular beats, to the highest turret of the Gengizkhani palace where the "Watcher of the Far Places" broke into high-pitched ululations of triumph, Koom Khan rode into town. He was at the head of a picked squadron of the recent rebels—now loyal supporters of Aziza Nurmahal, as they shouted to the throng—and near the end of the cortège, astride donkeys, their hands bound behind their backs and their heads facing the animals' tails, came Mr. Preserved Higgins and The Honorable Tollemache Wade —butts for the crude jests of the populace, also for a number of decrepit lemons and melons and eggs.

A great wave of joy surged from end to end of the capital: the turmoil and strife was over, once more peace had returned to the land, and even the Sheik-ul-Islam, who had sneaked back into town, none knew when and why, gave pious and hypocritical thanks that Khizr, the green star of peace and plenty, was again blessing Tamerlanistan, quoting learnedly from the Koran, proving his point by quoting about ten chapters from the *Marah al-Falah,* and then reënforcing his opinion by five hundred lines from the *Sharh Ayni.*

Joy and excitement and an impromptu holiday—the noisy holiday of Asia—with tents and ambling coffee houses, cook shops and lemonade stands, toy booths and merry-go-rounds jumping from the ground like mushrooms—and bear leaders and ballad singers,

ape leaders, fakirs, buffoons, jugglers, fortune tellers, snake charmers, and dancing boys in women's attire.

And, also impromptu, the love-making of Asia which is a trifle indelicate to Western ears and prejudices; the correct method of procedure being for the gallant man to tilt his turban or fur cap to a rakish angle—to show that he is a fast man—to tease his mustaches to the sharp points of a single, well-waxed hair, to shoulder his ashen stick, and to stalk about with a nonchalant, devil-may-care air until he sees a lady whose eyes seem to roll invitingly behind her veil. Then a graceful attitude and soft words:

"O Bride! O Female Pilgrim! O Dispenser of Delights!"—and whatever else the gallant man may have to say.

There is of course the chance that the Dispenser of Delights will refuse to dispense the same and will reply with some such little thing as: "May Allah cut out thy heart and feed it to the most unclean pigs of Syria! Curse thee for an unbelieving and thrice-unclean dog!" or: "Verily I declare that thy ancestry is rotten and thy manners deplorable! Verily I declare that thy female progenitors have been shameless and disreputable since the day of Allah's creation!"

Then the man's retort, with a proper drawl: "*Wah, ya'l aguz*—Ho, Old Woman!" and he would move away very quickly. For the temper of the fair ones of Asia is short and they may tell things about a man and his ancestry which never can be translated word for word into English—for reasons.

Joy and excitement, and cheers for Gulabian, for Koom Khan, for the princess, for Al Nakia!

Peace!

Friend would meet friend and greet each other with all the extravagance of the East, throwing themselves upon each other's breasts, placing right arm over left shoulder, squeezing like wrestlers, with intermittent hugs and caresses, then laying cheek delicately against cheek and flat palm against palm, at the same time making the loud, smacking noise of many kisses in the air.

When the prisoners were brought into the audience hall, Hector was utterly astonished to recognize his brother.

"Tollemache!" he cried. "Why—Tollemache . . ."

Then, quickly, he suppressed the words that were rising to his lips. He was here as the regent of Tamerlanistan and the other as a rebel—a slightly amused, slightly amazed, and altogether coolly collected rebel, in contrast to Mr. Preserved Higgins who believed, to quote his own words, in "bullyin' the other feller before the other feller gets a chance to bully you."

"I s'y!" he shouted. "Wot's all this 'ere muckin' about mean—mykin' me ride a donkey 'indside-front, and pokin' me at the point of a bleedin' lance all over this 'ere plurry, second-'and continent? I'm goin' to raise a 'ell of a stink with the British government, I am. I'm a British subject—and no lousy, card-cheatin' . . ."

"Shut up, you damned cad!" whispered Tollemache. "I tell you that . . ."

And then he was suddenly silent. For the Princess

Aziza Nurmahal, accompanied by Ayesha Zemzem, had entered the audience hall and was looking at him.

Long she looked, and steadily.

Hector Wade was in a quandary. By all the laws and rules of the land, it was his duty to sentence these two men to death.

Tollemache was his brother.

He said so to the princess, in a whisper.

"He is my brother, Aziza Nurmahal."

"Then he, too, is of the blood of the Gengizkhani—"

"Yes . . ."

"And," continued the princess, dreamily, "he, too, is the 'Expected One' . . ."

Hector had not heard her last remark. He did not know what to do or say.

Tollemache! His brother! He himself, on the other hand, was the regent of Tamerlanistan. There was his responsibility, his duty, toward the land, the princess.

His duty! Here it flooded through the mists of his brotherly affection—for he loved Tollemache, card scandal or no card scandal—like a naked, lonely hulk on a gray sea.

Yes, whatever his love for his brother, his duty came first. He couldn't help Tollemache. No! He couldn't help him—he repeated the words to himself over and over again—he couldn't help him, and no mistake.

He rose, about to pass sentence; and then, before he could speak, the princess raised her scepter.

"The *durbar* is over," she said, in a clear, ringing voice.

"But," protested Koom Khan, "the prisoners—the two sahebs—what punishment . . ."

"I am the autocrat of this land," said the princess, "remember that, Koom Khan. Remember, too"—touching the ancient English blade which connected the fate of her clan with that of the Wades of Dealle—"that once I was forced to forget that I am a woman and . . ."

"I remember," said Koom Khan, hastily, looking at the scar which disfigured his wrist.

"Good! The *durbar* is over. Let Higgins saheb be put in a stout prison. And as to the other saheb—I—I forgive him! For he, too, is of the Gengizkhani blood! His coming, too, was spoken of in the old prophecy—the wooing of the blades!"

And it was Jane who, being a woman and in love, thus wise beyond her years, put the right construction on the strange scene.

"Dad," she said to Mr. Warburton, "the little princess is in love with Tollemache Wade. She practically told him so."

"Most indelicate," commented her father, who considered all the softer emotions as rather immoral.

"I don't know, dad. It's the custom in the Orient for the woman to make the advances to the man."

"Can't say that, in this respect, the Orient differs so very much from the Occident," rejoined her father cynically.

Later during the day Hector talked to his brother in private.

He remembered how, years earlier, Tollemache had been his boyhood hero. From cricket to rugger, from bird-nesting to running with the harrier hounds, from singlestick fencing to a bout with the gloves, there was nothing which the other had not been able to do. Even afterwards, when both brothers belonged to the Dragoons and when Tollemache had got into debt, Hector had not lost his admiration, had often interceded for him with their father.

That card scandal?

Why—Hector said to himself that he understood. The temptation had been terrible, there had been that chorus girl—Gwendolyn something-or-other. Why, it would be all right, if Tollemache would only make a clean breast of it, if he would only play the game!

He put it into words, impulsively:

"Tollemache! I'm no jolly good at this sentimental stuff . . ."

"Nor I. Rather un-English, what?"

"Rather. But—I say—I'm fond of you, you know—"

"Thanks, old chap, and right back at you!"

"Then why aren't you frank with me? Why don't you 'fess up?"

"Nothing to 'fess up," smiled Tollemache. "Upon my word, I had no idea it was you who were regent here—Al Nakia—and all that sort of drivel. That cad of a Higgins never told me that . . ."

"I'm not speaking about that, Tollemache. I mean the old card scandal!"

The smile faded from the older man's lips.

"You believe it was I who cheated, don't you?"

"Of course!" came the blunt reply.

"Well—by God—though neither you nor the guv'nor ever gave me a chance to explain—I didn't!"

"You—you . . . ?"

"I—did—not!"

And, suddenly, Hector understood that Tollemache was speaking the truth.

"Who did—then . . . ?" he stammered; and then: "By Jingo, I have it! It's clear—as clear as daylight! It was Higgins!"

"Higgins? Rot! He has enough of the ready to burn it in chunks. A thousand quid is nothing to him!"

"I know. But . . ."

And Hector told his brother how Mr. Preserved Higgins, via Babu Bansi and Gulabian had heard of the prophecy of the blades, of the Englishman who, according to it, would come out of the West to save Tamerlanistan.

"So he went ahead and found out the name of the English family—our family, Tollemache—the Wades of Dealle—and he came to our house."

"Yes. I remember. Under the pretext that he wanted to buy or rent Dealle Castle, wasn't it? But—how did he find out that we were meant in the prophecy—even before we did ourselves?"

"I don't know. But he did. And—you see, he's Mr. Warburton's old enemy, and both are after land concessions, as you know—he decided to—oh—how would you put it?"

"Get one of our family into his toils, what? Regular melodramatic style!"

"Exactly," replied Hector. "After the scandal, he interviewed me, asked me to go to Asia for him. But I wouldn't play. I knocked him down. Then he got you. It's all perfectly clear."

"Right-oh! Let's interview our amazing Cockney friend!"

They did, and they found Mr. Preserved Higgins at first inclined to bluster.

But Hector reminded him of the fact that he was regent of Tamerlanistan, and that a word to the executioner would . . .

"You wouldn't?" protested Mr. Preserved Higgins. "Ain't we both British gents? I s'y—look 'ere . . ."

"No use arguing," said Hector. "Either you own up or . . ."

"Right-oh, cocky!" said Mr. Preserved Higgins, with that sudden and complete change of front which was one of his main characteristics and which, often, in the past, had given him the victory in financial battles. "You 'ave me by the short 'air on my neck. I own up, see? It was me cheated at cards. I used to myke oodles of tin at it, years back, when I was in South Africa and still belonged to these 'ere downtrodden masses."

Pressed to be more explicit, he told how, on the day of the old Ameer's death, his faithful agent, the Babu Bansi, had cabled him, had followed it up by other wires which detailed the story of the prophecy and the blades, and that, for the reasons which the

brothers had already guessed, he had made the acquaintance of their father, the earl, under the pretext of renting Dealle Castle.

"But how did you find out that it was our family which was meant by the prophecy?" demanded Tollemache.

"Nothin' to that, old cockywax! The Babu, 'e cybles me a description of the escutcheon wot is on this 'ere old English blyde wot the princess 'as, and so I and a sandy-'aired gent wot's my confidential secretary does a bit of lookin' through the peerage and the orfice of 'eraldry, until we finds this 'ere escutcheon—a double-'eaded eagle, ain't it? You know the rest!"

"I do," smiled Hector, "but you don't!"

"Wot you mean?"

"That you are going to cable over to London, to that secretary of yours, and have him put a full page advertisement in all the London dailies and the more important provincial papers, with a complete confession of what you did."

"I won't," said Mr. Preserved Higgins.

"You will," rejoined Hector, pointing through the iron-barred window at the palace courtyard where Wahab al-Shaitan, resplendent in his crimson-and-black robe, his two-handed sword across his supple shoulders, was saying light words of love to Kumar Zaida, the little slave girl.

"Right-oh!" said Mr. Preserved Higgins. "I will!"

Thus it happened that a sandy-haired gentleman, the next morning, looking from the fly-specked window at the gray, coiling streets of London City,

went to the door, opened and read a lengthy cablegram, whistled through his teeth, and said to himself that the guv'nor must have gone batty in his bloomin' old belfry.

But, knowing Mr. Preserved Higgins of old, he followed the instructions to the letter, and caused Fleet Street and Bishopsgate Street and Lombard Street to zum with the greatest financial sensation of a decade.

"Extry—extry!" shrilled the newsboys. "Mr. 'Iggins, the fymous capitalist, mykes full confession . . . cheated at cards . . . extry—extry!"

It was a few days later that Hector Wade, walking through the palace garden arm in arm with Jane, suddenly stopped and put his finger on his lips.

"Listen!" he whispered.

For, from behind an immense, gnarled deodar tree, drifted voices, the princess' and Tollemache's, speaking in soft, gliding Persian which Hector translated to Jane in an undertone.

"Aziza Nurmahal!" said Tollemache, "I need thee, I need thee so! The thought of thee going out of my life—God!—I cannot stand it. I could not face existence without thee!"

And the princess' answer:

"And I, too, best beloved, I need thee. Without thee, life would be but the dust of the rose petal, with the sweetness, the perfume, gone forever! Without thee, I shall be as lonely as the gray cliff swallow! I need thee, dear, as thou needest me. Thou art the Expected One! Thou and I, together, will finally fulfill the ancient prophecy—the wooing of blades!"

And it was of the wooing of blades that, not many days later, when the palace and the town, the mosques and bazaars and caravanserais rang with shouts of joy to celebrate the double wedding, Tollemache marrying the princess, and Hector marrying Jane Warburton, Ayesha Zemzem, the old nurse, spoke to Koom Khan and Gulabian.

"Two heads are better than one," she said, "when it comes to deal with such crafty rogues as you two —not to mention the governor of the western marches and Musa Al-Mutasim and many other scoundrels. The two Al Nakias! The two Expected Ones! Brothers and friends! And together rulers of this land! A brave wooing of blades indeed!"

"And a wooing of hearts," said Kumar Zaida, the little slave girl, "a wooing of bodies and . . ."

"Silence!" shrilled the nurse. "Silence, shameless daughter of a pimple! Thou art too young to know aught of love!"

"And thou too old!" came the reply, as Kumar Zaida ducked and ran to escape the nurse's stick.

CHAPTER XVIII

The wisdom of the old—which is, of course, the End.

Not many days later—the day following the departure of Mr. Ezra Warburton and Mr. Preserved Higgins who, enemies to the last, had interviewed Hector individually and separately on the question of the "concessions," to be met with the reply: "I'll grant no concessions to anybody. Tamerlanistan will be developed. But not with foreign money, nor for foreign profit. Through our own work—for our own profit!" . . . not many days later, the princess, turning to Hector at the end of the daily *durbar,* said that she was a little depressed.

"About what?" asked Hector.

"About Hajji Akhbar Khan, *Itizad el-Dowleh.* He sent thee here—and thus, indirectly, thy brother! His hand was the hand of benevolence and wisdom from the beginning. Yet has he never returned from the far places—has he never explained why he sent thee as he did send thee—without telling thee word of the ancient prophecy—why he let thee go blindfolded, to battle against Fate!"

And the answer came, a week or two afterwards, in a letter delivered by a messenger who came mysteriously and disappeared mysteriously.

It bore neither date nor place, and read as follows:

"By the will of Allah, the One, the King of Men, the King of the Day of Judgment, may this letter be safely delivered into the hands of Aziza Nurmahal, Gengizkhani.

"A prophecy is a prophecy. But a human heart is a human heart, a human soul is a human soul, and it is only the dust and the grime and the sufferings which purify the truly great. Thus, when Al Nakia came to me, I gave him but little help. Nor did I tell him of the prophecy. For Tamerlanistan needed a man who could follow his own mind, unhampered, unclogged, by prophecies and traditions.

"If, thus, Al Nakia proved himself to be a good and strong man, the prophecy proved true; if he proved himself bad and weak, the prophecy proved untrue.

"And it DID prove true!

"I am old. Thus wise. Thus, too, stubborn. I shall never, therefore, return to Tamerlanistan. For, while my stewardship was good in its time and generation, time changes, and customs, and conditions. And, being old and stubborn, I would doubtless disapprove of many innovations of which Al Nakia and his brother would approve. Thence would come unhappiness and bitterness. Therefore I shall never return.

"Gossip travels swiftly on wings. It travels East and West, North and South, even to the place where I shall live out my days.

"Thus do I know of the double wedding, the double fulfillment, and my old heart is happy at the double happiness, and just a little sad with envy—the envy of an old and useless man who, years, years ago, filled the caverns of his dreams and his life with words and deeds of love.

"May thou, Aziza Nurmahal, and the foreign woman bear as many man-children as there are hairs in my beard!

"Hajji Akhbar Khan, once *Itizad el-Dowleh.*"

THE END.

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